

SIKH IDENTITY

OPINDERJIT KAUR TAKHAR

SIKH IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATION OF GROUPS AMONG SIKHS

*To my parents
Tara Singh Randhawa
and Surinder Kaur
who have always been my inspiration*

Sikh Identity

An Exploration of Groups Among Sikhs

OPINDERJIT KAUR TAKHAR

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2005 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Takhar, Opinderjit Kaur

Sikh identity : an exploration of groups among Sikhs

1. Sikh sects 2. Identity (Psychology) – Religious aspects – Sikhism 3. Sikhism

I. Title

294.6'9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Takhar, Opinderjit Kaur, 1972–

Sikh identity : an exploration of groups among Sikhs / Opinderjit Kaur Takhar.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7546-5202-5 (Hardback : alk. paper)

1. Sikhs – Ethnic identity. 2. Sikhism – Customs and practices. 3. Sikhism – History. I. Title.

DS432.S5T35 2005

2004025361

294.6–dc22

Typeset in Times New Roman by Tradespools, Frome, Somerset.

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-5202-1 (hbk)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Glossary</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Who is a Sikh? Historical Perspectives	5
2 Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā	38
3 Nāmdhāris	59
4 Ravidāsīs	89
5 Vālmīkis	124
6 Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere	158
7 Conclusion	179
Appendix: Illustrations and literature from the groups	192
Bibliography	203
<i>Index</i>	213



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Illustrations

Unless otherwise stated, the illustrations are © the author.

2.1	Mohinder Singh, leader of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, washing the feet of the <i>pañj pyāre</i>	53
3.1	Gurū Jagjīt Singh's position among the Nāmdhāris	71
3.2	Preparation for a Nāmdhāri <i>havan</i>	77
5.1	<i>Pālkī</i> of a Vālmiki temple, housing the Punjabi <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	149
5.2	<i>Pālkī</i> of a Vālmiki temple, housing both the <i>Gurū Granth Sāhib</i> and the <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	150
5.3	The Vālmiki emblem of the bow and arrow	151
7.1	The federal identity of the <i>Panth</i>	189

In Appendix

A.1	The office of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā at Amritsar (Reproduced by kind permission from the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā)	192
A.2	Sant Puran Singh and Bhāi Norang Singh at the Birmingham <i>gurdwārā</i> . (Reproduced by kind permission from the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā)	193
A.3	Sant Puran Singh. (Reproduced by kind permission from the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā)	194
A.4	Gurū Jagjīt Singh	195
A.5	The present Gurū leaving the Forest Gate Centre	196
A.6	A participant of the <i>havan</i> ceremony taking <i>amrit</i> before commencing the rituals	197
A.7	Celebrating <i>dwālī</i> in the Hindu context by Ravidāsīs (Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Charan Singh Bunger)	198
A.8	The <i>arātī</i> hymn for Ravidāsī children (Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Charan Singh Bunger)	199
A.9	Leaflet published by the Gurū Ravidāss Dharmik Sabhā Wolverhampton, England (Reproduced by kind permission of Mr Piara Lal)	200
A.10	Notice to all Ravidāsīs to proclaim their religion as Ravidāsī (Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Charan Singh Bunger)	201
A.11	Bhāi Jaitā handing over the severed head of Gurū Tegh Bahādur to the child Gobind. A popular representation	202



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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Dr W. Owen Cole and Dr Jeaneane Fowler for their tremendous help and support as my doctorate supervisors and also for their comments relating to the present work. This book has arisen from the research I undertook for a PhD at the University of Wales, Newport. I should also like to thank Dr W. Owen Cole for supplying the jacket image.

From the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā followers, I am thankful to Bhāi Mohinder Singh, Mr Harbans Singh Sagoo and Mr Sarup Singh. Detailed research of the Nāmdhāri community would not have been possible without the tremendous assistance of Surjit Singh Jeet and Vasdev Bhamrah. Mr B.R. Bharti and Dr Charan Bunger have been of considerable help during my research among the Ravidāsī communities. From the Vālmiki community, I would like to show my appreciation and gratitude to Mr and Mrs Davinder Prasad (Coventry), Mr and Mrs Prakash Chand Kadara and Mr Jagdish Rai (Birmingham) for making me feel very welcome at the Coventry and Birmingham Vālmiki temples. Also with regard to the Vālmiki community, I am grateful to Mr P. Soba (Southall), Mr Saida Ram and Darshan Chohan (Oxford) and Mr Kartar Chand (Bedford) for their comments. From the Coventry Vālmiki community, I am grateful to Mr Rattan Chand Thapar, Mr Ajit Singh Mattu, Mr Joginder Singh Gill and Mr Tarsem Shergill. Shivcharan Singh, a *gorā* Sikh from Finchley, London has provided a great deal of information regarding the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere and the 3HO. I express my thanks to members present at each of the congregational services I attended for their hospitality and invaluable insights.

My husband Baljinder has continuously encouraged me through his loving support and patience. I thank him for reading over endless drafts of this work. My gratitude is also extended to my parents-in-law for their support, especially in taking care of my daughters Vannisha and Nikkita, without which the completion of the present work would have been impossible. My sister Varinder has played a vital role in enabling me to understand and get to grips with computer know-how.

Finally, my eternal gratitude is expressed to my parents who have been my inspiration throughout my life. They have always encouraged me and have been tremendously supportive. This book is dedicated to them as a token of my love, appreciation and gratitude.



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Glossary

<i>achūt</i>	Literally translated as ‘untouchable’, a member of the former Untouchables.
<i>Ad Dharm</i>	The Movement of the 1920s, responsible for raising the psyche of the Ravidāsīs.
<i>Ādi Granth</i>	The Sacred Book of the Sikhs (AG in text).
<i>ādivāsī</i>	The original inhabitants of India.
<i>ahaṁkāra</i>	Ego, one of the five vices, causing individuality.
<i>akhaṇḍ pāth</i>	A continuous 48-hour reading of the <i>Gurū Granth Sāhib</i> .
<i>amrit</i>	Holy water, nectar.
<i>amritdhārī</i>	An initiated Sikh who wears the Five Ks – the five symbols of the Sikh faith.
<i>amrit chaknā</i>	One who will take <i>amrit</i> (verb).
<i>amrit śakyā</i>	One who has taken <i>amrit</i> (noun); used synonymously with <i>amritdhārī</i> .
<i>anand kāraj</i>	The Sikh wedding service.
<i>ātman</i>	The individual soul.
<i>avatār</i>	An incarnation usually of the Hindu God Viṣṇu.
<i>avidyā</i>	Ignorance.
<i>Bābā</i>	A Holy man.
<i>baisākhī</i>	The Sikh New Year, celebrated on 14 April.
<i>bāṇā</i>	Attire associated with the <i>Khālsā</i> , this includes the Five Ks and the turban.
<i>bāṇī</i>	Religious teachings of the Sikh Gurūs.
<i>bhagat bāṇī</i>	The works of the low-caste <i>Sants</i> , contained in the <i>Gurū Granth Sāhib</i> .
<i>bhakti</i>	Loving devotion to the Divine.
<i>bhog</i>	The end of a <i>pāth</i> .
<i>Brahman</i>	The Totally Transcendent Absolute.
<i>Brahman-ātman</i>	The concept of monism.
<i>brāhmin</i>	The Hindu class of priests.
<i>caste</i>	Sikhs use the concept of <i>jāti</i> rather than <i>varṇa</i> .
<i>cakra</i>	Centre of consciousness.
<i>deh-dhārī</i>	The Gurū in bodily form.

<i>ḍīwālī</i>	Sikh festival to commemorate Gurū Hargobind's release from prison.
<i>ḍīwān</i>	The main service in the <i>gurdwārā</i> .
<i>giān</i>	Knowledge.
<i>giānī</i>	One who has knowledge of the Sikh scriptures.
<i>gorā</i>	A western convert to Sikhism; literally 'white'.
<i>grisī</i>	The householder's life.
<i>gurbāṇī</i>	The words of the Sikh Gurūs.
<i>gurdwārā</i>	Sikh religious place of worship.
<i>gurmukh</i>	The individual who has overcome his or her ego. Literally one who is 'God-orientated'.
<i>gurmukhī</i>	The language in which the Sikh scriptures are written.
<i>gurpurb</i>	Celebration of births, deaths and martyrdoms of the Sikh Gurūs.
<i>gurū</i>	A spiritual teacher/guide. Also used for the ten Sikh Gurūs.
<i>Gurū Granth Sāhib</i>	The Holy Book that is the Eternal Gurū of the Sikhs.
<i>Gurū Nānak</i>	Followers of Sant Puran Singh of Karicho, Kenya
<i>Nishkāṁ Sewak</i>	and his successors.
<i>Jathā</i>	
<i>halāl</i>	An animal killed according to Muslim law; <i>Khālsā</i> Sikhs are forbidden to consume <i>halāl</i> meat.
<i>haumai</i>	Ego, preventing the individual from becoming <i>gurmukh</i> .
<i>havan</i>	Fire ceremony.
<i>Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO)</i>	Followers of Yogī Bhajan, who place immense emphasis on <i>kuṇḍalinī yoga</i> .
<i>Hukam</i>	The Divine Will of God.
<i>izzat</i>	Honour. Family/individual prestige.
<i>jaṭ</i>	The <i>zāt</i> of farmers.
<i>jhaṭkā</i>	Animal killed by one stroke, this meat can be consumed by Sikhs.
<i>jīvaṇmukt</i>	One who is liberated while still alive.
<i>jñāna</i>	Knowledge.
<i>kacchā</i>	Pair of shorts worn by <i>amritdhārī</i> Sikhs.
<i>kanghā</i>	A comb which <i>amritdhārī</i> Sikhs wear in their hair.
<i>karā</i>	Steel bracelet worn on the right wrist.

<i>karāh prasād</i>	A sweet dough-like mixture shared by the congregation.
<i>karam/karma</i>	The law of action and reaction.
<i>kes</i>	Uncut hair of a Sikh.
<i>kesdhārī</i>	A Sikh with uncut hair.
<i>Khālsā</i>	Community of the 'Pure Ones' – initiated Sikhs.
<i>Khaṇḍā</i>	The Sikh emblem.
<i>khatrī</i>	The caste to which the Sikh Gurūs belonged.
<i>kirpān</i>	A sword carried by <i>amritdhārī</i> Sikhs.
<i>kīrtan</i>	Devotional singing, usually in the <i>gurdwārā</i> .
<i>Kūkā</i>	A term used synonymously with Nāmdhārī.
<i>kuṇḍalīnī</i>	Dormant energy, represented by a coiled snake.
<i>laṅgar</i>	Communal meal which all share at the <i>gurdwārā</i> .
<i>lāvān</i>	The four circuits which the couple take around the <i>Gurū Granth Sāhib</i> during the wedding ceremony. Each circuit is taken at the end of each verse of the wedding hymn composed by Gurū Rāmdās for his daughter's wedding.
<i>manmukh</i>	Ignorant being; one bound by desires, ego and worldly concerns. Literally one who is 'self-orientated'.
<i>māyā</i>	Illusion.
<i>mazhabī</i>	A low-caste convert into the Sikh faith.
<i>monā</i>	A Sikh who cuts his or her hair.
<i>mukti</i>	Liberation of the soul from transmigration.
<i>Nadar</i>	Grace of God.
<i>Nām</i>	The Name of God.
<i>Nāmdhārī</i>	Sikh followers who follow a continuation of living Gurūs.
<i>nām japnā</i>	Recital of the Name of God.
<i>nām simran</i>	Meditation on the Name of God.
<i>nirguṇa</i>	The unmanifest Absolute.
<i>nīśān sāhib</i>	The flag which symbolizes the <i>gurdwārā</i> as a Sikh place of worship.
<i>pañj pyāre</i>	Historically, the first five initiates of the <i>Khālsā</i> ; today five initiated Sikhs are also referred to as the <i>pañj pyāre</i> and are entitled to administer <i>amrit</i> to those wishing to take initiation.
<i>Panth</i>	The Sikh Community.

<i>patit</i>	An apostate Sikh.
<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	One of the Epics of Hinduism, used by the Vālmīkis.
<i>rāmgaṛhīā/tarkhān</i>	The carpenter/artisan caste.
<i>Ravidās</i>	The Gurū of the Ravidāsī community.
<i>Ravidāsī</i>	Community of the followers of Ravidās.
<i>Rehat Maryādā</i>	<i>Khālsā</i> guide for the Sikh way of life.
<i>sabhā</i>	Religious building, this term is frequently used among the Ravidāsīs and Vālmīkis.
<i>sādhana</i>	The practice that leads to spiritual enlightenment, the goal of each soul.
<i>sadhāran pāth</i>	Reading of the whole of the Sikh scripture, with breaks.
<i>saguṇa</i>	The manifest aspect of the Absolute.
<i>sahajdhārī</i>	A non- <i>Khālsā</i> Sikh.
<i>sampaṭ pāth</i>	Reading of the whole of the Sikh scripture, undertaken in times of crisis/illness.
<i>samsāra</i>	The continuous cycle of transmigration.
<i>saṅgat</i>	The Sikh congregation.
<i>saṅgrānd</i>	First day of the Indian month.
<i>Sant</i>	A spiritually enlightened individual, also used to refer to the <i>Sant</i> tradition of North India.
<i>Satgurū</i>	The ‘True Gurū’, a Sikh term used for referring to the Divine.
<i>Scheduled Classes</i>	Formerly known as the Untouchables, who were traditionally regarded as being outside the caste system.
<i>sewā</i>	Service to the community and to God, as well as serving in the <i>gurdwārās</i> .
<i>Shromaṇī Gurdwārā</i>	This committee is responsible for the religious affairs of the Sikh community, as well as control of the <i>gurdwārās</i> in Punjab and Haryana.
<i>Parbandhak Committee</i>	Organization which has <i>gorā</i> convert to the Sikh faith.
<i>Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere</i>	A pupil.
<i>śiṣyah</i>	The fourth class of the Hindu caste system.
<i>śudra</i>	
<i>Vālmiki/Bālmiki</i>	Author of the <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> and the community of his followers.
<i>Wāhegurū</i>	‘The Wonderful One’, a term used by Sikhs for the Absolute.

Yoga Vasiṣṭha

Yogī Bhajan

Vālmīki's metaphysical work.

The spiritual head of both the 3HO and Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere.

zāt

Traditional occupation.



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Introduction

It is commonly assumed that all Sikhs are the same, but the very existence of different groups¹ who have varying beliefs and practices within the Sikh Community (*Panth*) illustrate aptly that the *Panth* is not homogenous.

It was as an undergraduate that I first came across any mention of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*,² which appeared to be a definitive statement of *Khālsā*³ Sikh identity in the *Panth*. This was my first *academic* contact with my long-practised faith. The *Rehat Maryādā* suggests that a *true* Sikh is a person who lives by the tenets of Sikhism, including observance of the *Khālsā* with its prominent display of five external symbols, known as the Five Ks. The *Rehat Maryādā* imparts a very firm definition of who a Sikh is, and I discovered that certain of my practices – and those of my family – did not measure up to its ideals. This left me with many questions, such as, if a *true* Sikh is an *amritdhārī*, an initiated Sikh, who has taken *amrit sanskār*,⁴ and who obeys rules such as a ban on alcohol and cutting the hair, then am I a Sikh? Is my father, who cuts his hair a Sikh? Who really *is* a Sikh? Thus, although the original intention of the *Rehat Maryādā* was to impart a corporate identity on all Sikhs, it is, in actual fact, responsible for excluding many Sikhs from its definition. Hence, for a substantial proportion of the *Panth*, the *Rehat Maryādā*'s depiction of what it views as a *true* Sikh appears to be an inadequate yardstick for what it really means to be Sikh. One essential issue is immediately apparent: the fact that the majority of the Sikh *Panth* is not *amritdhārī*. Does this mean therefore, that the majority of the *Panth* cannot in actual fact be considered as *true* Sikhs?

This book addresses the implications of the definition of a Sikh as stated in the *Rehat Maryādā*. The *Rehat Maryādā* highlights a number of *types* of Sikhs. These include:

- *monā/sahajdhārī* – clean-shaven.
- *kesdhārī* – one who keeps the *kes*,⁵ the hair and beard, unshorn but is not necessarily initiated.
- *amritdhārī/Khālsā*⁶ – initiated Sikh.
- *patit* – one who, having had taken *amrit*, has lapsed.

This book seeks to answer four questions: (i) What indicators for Sikh identity are suggested by an analysis of the historical development of Sikhism from the period of Gurū Nānak to the present day? (ii) Where applicable, what particular ethos is created by the founders and/or leaders of each of the groups, and how does this ethos inform issues related to corporate Sikh identity? (iii) What indicators for Sikh identity are suggested by an analysis of a selection of groups

that are regarded in the present as Sikh, or who have been regarded so in the past? (iv) How far is the *Rehat Maryādā* helpful and appropriate in defining a Sikh?

A *Khālsā* Sikh is the ideal of the *Rehat Maryādā*'s definition of a Sikh. And in this context, too, this book highlights how far this definition accepts, or differentiates between, members of the *Panth* – namely, *amritdhārī*, *kesdhārī* and *sahajdhārī* Sikhs. An important remit is the assessment of whether the *Rehat Maryādā* is, indeed, a sensible yardstick for depicting the *Sikhness* of the groups selected in this work. The very fact that there are groups present in Sikhism today necessitates scrutiny of the very boundaries constituting *Khālsā* adherence.

This book assesses the moves within Sikhism to establish *specific* criteria for defining uniformly who exactly is a Sikh, and the viability of such uniform identity. To this end the book commences with an analysis of the history and development of the Sikh faith, identifying criteria that have been established over the last five centuries to discover how the Sikh faith and its followers have been defined. This information is used as a basis for an analysis of the five groups chosen, namely: the Gurū Nānak Nishkān Sewak Jathā, the Nāmdhārīs, the Ravidāsīs, the Vālmikīs and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, which is often equated with the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO). The scrutiny of each group highlights its implications towards an examination of corporate Sikh identity. A close look at the history of each group is vital in order to ascertain at what point it develops a unique stance of its own, particularly in terms of leaders and founders. The criteria I establish for assessing a group's identity with regard to its beliefs and practices are informed by essential beliefs from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and common and traditional practices that would be considered correct behaviour in accordance with the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*.

Below is a list of more proximate questions that have informed the discussion of each of the five groups and have thus highlighted their implications and contributions towards the issue of Sikh identity. These are:

- By what historical and traditional criteria should Sikh identity be characterized?
- How far do the historical claims of a group identify it with the status of Sikh identity, and what are the reasons why this identification might be rejected or accepted?
- Were members of a group Sikh historically, but have no present connection with Sikhism?
- With regard to the beliefs and practices of each group, is it
 - a to be regarded as being Sikh, or
 - b more orientated to being defined as Hindu, or
 - c neither Sikh nor Hindu, but a faith in its own right?

- Is a group ‘Sikh’ according to the *Rehat Maryādā* definition or is it rejected on the basis of the *Rehat Maryādā*, but regards itself as Sikh nevertheless?
- Does the *Rehat Maryādā* definition exclude a group as essentially non-Sikh or does the group itself not desire to be within the boundaries of Sikhism?
- Are the beliefs and practices of a group in accordance with teachings of the Sikh Gurūs and the *Rehat Maryādā*, or do they suggest other influences, such as Hinduization of Sikh practices?
- Does the *Panth* as a whole regard the beliefs and practices of the selected groups as being Sikh or non-Sikh?
- Why do individuals identify with a particular group, and does group identity inform a Sikh identity?
- Does a group have a particular caste following? If so, what relevance does this have for the issue of Sikh identity?
- To what extent does ethnicity inform Sikh identity?

Analysis of the groups commences in [Chapter Two](#) with the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā which on the surface appears to be thoroughly Sikh orientated and a perfect example of Sikhs following the *Rehat Maryādā* scrupulously. In [Chapter Three](#) I have examined the Nāmdhāri Sikhs who are stringent *Khālsā* Sikhs in terms of their outward form. On the other hand, however, their tradition of continuing the line of human Gurūs presents obscurity when allegiance to the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* is being considered. Importantly, the group has been honoured by the Shromaṇī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC),⁷ which defines the Nāmdhāris as Sikhs due to their massive contribution towards India’s Independence.

The conversion of low-castes into the *Panth* presents interesting perspectives related to the issue of Sikh identity. In this respect, an analysis of the Ravidāsī and Vālmīki communities is undertaken in [Chapters Four](#) and [Five](#). I have illustrated that after conversion to the *Panth* low-caste converts were not treated equally by higher-caste Sikhs. This has resulted in the former being forced to establish distinct identities from Sikhs. Clearly, caste status informs acceptance or non-acceptance as a Sikh. Caste discriminations were continuously spoken against by the Sikh Gurūs. Nevertheless, caste has survived in the *Panth*. Furthermore, both the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and the Nāmdhāris are predominantly of the *rāmgarhiā zāt*.⁸ The issue of *zāt*, therefore, is critical to the topic of Sikh identity.

A scrutiny of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere has been undertaken in [Chapter Six](#) because of its non-Punjabi background. The inclusion of a study of *gorā* Sikhs is particularly pertinent to issues of Sikh identity. The *gorā* Sikhs, who show explicit adherence to the *Khālsā* form, and being non-Punjabi, provide a different tangent to Sikh identity, which has been

predominantly linked to the Punjabi ethnicity of the majority of the *Panth*. The social behaviour of the Punjabi groups is linked to their common ethnicity, and this Punjabi ethnicity often takes precedence over what religious praxis dictates. The reluctance to accept *gorā* Sikhs by the majority Punjabi *Panth*, stems from this Punjabi basis, and is a theme that is examined in detail in the conclusion to the present work. From experience as a Punjabi Sikh, I have illustrated that Punjabi customs and traditions dictate what is right and wrong at the everyday level. Mainly, these take form as *izzat* ‘family honour’. What a Punjabi Sikh does, and avoids is, therefore, mainly based on his/her Punjabi ethnicity. The particular balance between such ethnicity and Sikh identity itself is an interesting one.

In conclusion, this book addresses the issue of Sikh identity with reference to a number of themes that contribute to criteria that have arisen from an examination of the five groups. Each group has its own unique contribution to make towards highlighting certain indicators and inhibitors of a Sikh identity. I have concluded that there is no authoritative yardstick with which to assess the issue of Sikh identity. Thus, a uniform, corporate identity of the Sikh community, as a whole, is not possible. Indeed, it serves to alienate a substantial proportion of Sikhs from the overall fold of the Sikh faith. What I have suggested is a federal identity. This would mean one or two core beliefs but, further than that, it is up to the individual group to express its unique beliefs and practices.

Notes

¹ By group I refer to followers of a particular leader or founder who is unique to that following.

² The prescribed norm of behaviour, in the form of rules and regulations, which is to be followed by initiated Sikhs. The whole of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* may be found in appendix two of this book.

³ The *Khālsā* was created by Gurū Gobind Singh in 1699 and gave Sikhs a visible outward appearance, see [Chapter One](#).

⁴ The rite of initiation whereby the initiate drinks water that has been made holy by reciting verses from the Sikh scripture, and to which sugar crystals have been added: it is thus that *amrit*, holy water, is prepared.

⁵ Some authors occasionally use the spelling *kesh*, I shall, however, be retaining the traditional spelling and dropping the *h*.

⁶ *Kesdhārī* and *amritdhārī* Sikhs are superficially identical in outward appearance.

⁷ The SGPC is regarded as the authority on matters pertaining to the Sikh community and is, indeed, responsible for the publication of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*.

⁸ The carpenter/artisan caste.

Chapter 1

Who is a Sikh? Historical Perspectives

The issue of Sikh identity dates back to the time of the Gurūs and has not been resolved 500 years later. The first definition of a Sikh by legislation came as the consequence of the *Gurdwārās Act* in 1925 and was later modified in 1971. I begin with an analysis of identity at the time of the foundation of Sikhism, that is, with the early Sikh community under the guidance of the first Sikh Gurū, Nānak (1469–1539) in order to assess what a Sikh was prior to the *Gurdwārās Act* and, indeed, prior to the formation of the *Khālsā* by Gurū Gobind Singh in 1699.

Sikh Identity in the Early Sikh Community

The early followers of Gurū Nānak were known as the *Nānak Panthīs*. To be a follower of Gurū Nānak in the earliest times meant making *bhakti* (loving devotion to the Divine) the centre of one's life through meditation on the *Nām*, the Name or essence of God, and concentrating on *gurbāṇī*. This was, essentially, an internalized, meditative focus. The *Nānak Panth*, therefore, had no need to be concerned with a sharp distinction, externally, from the other faiths of the time. There was no urgent need during this period for Sikhs to identify themselves as being distinct from Hindus, and they shared the same festivals, as well as the same philosophical beliefs such as *karma* and *saṃsāra*. Oberoi¹ reiterates this lack of a need for an independent identity for Sikhs in the early period of Sikhism; up to the time of the fourth Gurū, the main emphasis on *bhakti*, rather than any outward recognition, was characteristic.² He remarks that seventeenth-century Sikhs existed in a universe that was 'free of fixed identities',³ that is, there was no great concern to differentiate between the Punjabi Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs.

However, Oberoi's views should not be pressed as far as to accept too blurred an identity for early Sikhs. Clearly, identity during this period was not an issue, but there were sufficient differences from Hinduism and Islam to differentiate these early Sikhs in some ways. The emphasis was on living a life of simplicity and purity, one in which the individual was not entangled in the never-ending saga of rituals and *brāhmaṇism*. Gurū Nānak offered his followers serenity through meditation on the Name of God, *nām simran*, and through singing praises, *kīrtan*, to the Divine. A 'Sikh' in this period was a 'disciple' of the Gurū: as the term *Sikh* itself illustrates. Interestingly, there is only one

example of '*sikkha*' used in the *bāṇī* of Gurū Nānak.⁴ The term alludes to one 'having instruction, guided by teaching'.⁵ This suggests that Gurū Nānak's aim was not to create a distinct movement, but rather to guide others towards liberation. The emphasis was on following the teachings of Gurū Nānak, not following him as the leader of a new movement.

Nevertheless, the early community must have felt some degree of separation, due to the different nature of the teachings of Gurū Nānak from those of Hindu and Muslim ascetics and the different emphases in praxis. Indeed, Gurū Nānak's compilation of a *pothi* 'book' of his hymns further indicates that his followers were not to utilize Hindu or Muslim scriptures. The 'truth' that was revealed by God to Gurū Nānak was preserved in his *pothi*. Pashaura Singh is also of the opinion that 'the process of Sikh self-definition began in Gurū Nānak's lifetime during the period when he settled at Kartarpur'.⁶ Indeed, the famous couplet by Gurū Nānak:

There is no Hindu,
There is no Musalman

is in itself indicative of the already recognized separateness of the followers of Gurū Nānak from the two dominant traditions of the time. Nānak's emphasis was on *bhakti*, but this was not the *saguṇa bhakti* of popular Hinduism that was offered to a tangible manifestation of the Divine; rather it was *nirguṇa bhakti* towards a formless God. It is highly likely that Nānak belonged to the Northern *Sant* tradition (an 'association' of Hindu and Muslim saints who worshipped the Absolute as being beyond form, *nirguṇa*) thereby rejecting a great deal of Hindu practices such as the superiority of *brāhmins* and their dependence on performing rituals. Furthermore, McLeod has stated that the need for an identity amongst the early community became greater in the light of offspring born into the Sikh faith.⁷ He writes that: 'The janam-sākhīs [the birth testimonies of Gurū Nānak] reveal something of this struggle for identity, and of the tensions which it involved'.⁸ The 'tensions' mentioned here, involved probably the degrees to which followers should detach from their Hindu religious background. This continued link with Hinduism was inevitable since the majority of followers had been born as Hindus and, more significantly, Gurū Nānak himself was a Hindu by birth. Nevertheless, I suggest that, at this period, it is highly likely that followers remained Hindus: their following of Gurū Nānak did not necessarily mean they became non-Hindus, but they were certainly becoming different Hindus in respect of much belief and some practice.

In differentiating his followers from *brāhmanic* Hinduism, Gurū Nānak continuously stressed the irrelevance of rituals that dominated popular Hindu devotion. He also denounced the prejudice of the Hindu caste system (AG 747), himself refusing to wear the sacred thread that would demonstrate his spiritual rebirth as a member of the *dvijā* classes. These are the top three classes

of the Hindu class system who alone are entitled to undergo the sacred thread ceremony that indicates the spiritual rebirth of the individual. There was much to distinguish his followers from Muslims too, and this included the elevation of the position of women. But Gurū Nānak retained in his teachings the concepts of *karma* and *saṃsāra*, which stand in opposition to the Muslim belief in the day of judgement: such Hindu concepts were accepted in Sikhism rather than Muslim ones. The acceptance of such concepts further obfuscates the Sikh break from Hinduism in the early Sikh community. There was, however, no *real* break from Hinduism at this point, rather it was the ritual aspect which found no place in Gurū Nānak's message. It is this simplicity, together with the lack of insistence on intermediaries such as the *brāhmins*, which would have attracted his first followers.

From his teachings it appears that Gurū Nānak would have been against any symbols or markers of external devotion. Therefore, it is to be expected that the early *Panth* concentrated on the internalization of religion, rather than an outward identity. This is indicative *per se* of some degree of differentiation. Although the *Nānak Panth* was not concerned with issues of identity during Gurū Nānak's period, or in the immediate aftermath of his death,⁹ a certain sense of belonging must have existed for his coterie to be able to identify themselves with Gurū Nānak. It is very doubtful that the Kartarpur community would have had any external markers to symbolize their loyalty to Gurū Nānak's message.

The works of Bhāi ('brother', indicating respect) Gurdās, which are the earliest extant sources available as witness to the development of the early Sikh community, provide a clearer picture of the nature of the Kartarpur community. Bhāi Gurdās' works are of significance with regard to what was expected of a Sikh during the early evolution of the *Panth*. In the context of investigating whether there was a prescribed norm of behaviour for Sikhs prior to the creation of the *Khālsā*, Bhāi Gurdās provides *no* reference to the importance of the *kes* or, in fact, to any other distinguishable feature, for the early community. He is, nevertheless, aware that the followers of the Sikh Gurūs are not to be regarded as either Hindu or Muslim. According to Bhāi Gurdās the people of these faiths are 'selfish, jealous, proud, bigoted and violent'.¹⁰ The qualities of a true Sikh are clearly indicated by him: 'They having loving devotion in their heart remain jubilant. Such people are the emperors full of delight. Becoming egoless they serve the *saṅgat*, congregation, by bringing water, grinding corn etc. for it. In humility and joy they lead altogether distinct life (*sic*)'.¹¹ This kind of emphasis on interiorized religion and faith as being the hallmark of a Sikh is repeatedly stressed in his works. A *true* Sikh is one who keeps the company of *Sants* and meditates on the Name of God: 'He with full care keeps his consciousness attuned to the Word and listens to nothing except the words of Guru. He beholds the true Guru and without the company of the saints feels himself blind and deaf'.¹² Participation in

exteriorized religion, in the form of irrelevant rituals, is the seal of the *manmukh* (the ignorant and selfish individual, literally ‘one who is self-orientated’) who stands antagonistic to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. One must become a *gurmukh* (the spiritually awake individual whose orientation is towards God, rather than the self, literally ‘one who is God-orientated’) and hold the Name of God as being the one saving act: ‘The life led in the light of omens, the nine planets ... incantations, magic divination by lines and by the voice is all futile ... The *gurmukhs* who reject all superstitions enjoy happiness with their Lord and get across the world-ocean’.¹³ Further indication that the *gurmukh* is essentially a spiritual being is emphasized in the importance of rising in the early hours of the morning (*amritvelā*) and meditating on the Name of God.¹⁴ Overtly and repeatedly, a true Sikh, according to the *Vārs* of Bhāi Gurdās, is one who centres his/her life on the Gurū and the *śabad*: ‘Adopting the teachings of the Guru, the individual is called a Sikh of the Guru’.¹⁵ The importance attached to initiation for the followers of the Gurūs is indicated by Bhāi Gurdās. To become a Sikh – a disciple – one must take initiation: ‘Getting initiated by the Guru the disciple has become a Sikh’.¹⁶ It is important to note that initiation in the *Vārs* of Bhāi Gurdās refers to *charanamrit*¹⁷ and not to *khaṇde-dī-pāhul*.¹⁸ Therefore, the form of initiation in the early Sikh community had no requirements to uphold any outward symbols of faith. The emphasis was placed throughout on spiritual elevation.

The *true* Sikh, in the early community therefore, was one who arose early and meditated on the Name of God. By this, both the heart and mind were purified in order to await humbly the Grace of God, which alone can liberate the soul from *saṃsāra*, transmigration. The emphasis was purely on an inward identification with the teachings of Gurū Nānak. Accordingly, therefore, a *true* Sikh in the period of Gurū Nānak was a *gurmukh*.

At death, it is the *gurmukh* who will become united with God; this is the goal of the Sikh faith. The *manmukh* who has not meditated on God’s *nām*, will continue to transmigrate in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. All such aspects are at the heart of Sikh metaphysics, and it is a heart that insists on an *inward* religion as emphasized by Gurū Nānak and his successors. This does not mean that Hinduism and Islam were seen as concocted, but rather, Gurū Nānak taught that one’s faith need not be expressed outwardly.¹⁹

A Sikh in Gurū Nānak’s day was one whose mind had been cleansed of all evil as a result of *nām simran* and *nām jāpnā* (meditation on God’s Name), *kirat karnā* (performing good deeds) and *vand chaknā* (sharing one’s income with the less fortunate). The definition of a Sikh was a wide one in the Kartarpur community. It was with the successors of Gurū Nānak that the distinct identity of the community was gradually developed.

Changes That Occurred with the Next Eight Gurūs

The first moves towards a distinct Sikh identity were taken by Gurū Amardās. By the period of his gurūship there were many Sikhs by convention, that is, they were born into the Sikh faith as a result of their parents having adopted Sikhism. There was thus a need for a degree of institutionalization since the Sikh faith was no longer in its initial stage. Since first generation Sikhs had willingly experienced the beauty of Gurū Nānak's teachings, they knew, to a certain extent, what was expected of them as his followers. It was with the increasing number of second generation Sikhs that a clearer identity of being distinct from Hindus and Muslims was needed. Such an institutionalization of the Sikh faith was vital in order for it to be able to adapt and survive in changing situations. Indeed, Gurū Nānak himself ensured the continuation of his ideas by appointing a human Gurū before his death.

But the establishment of more institutionalized practices by the Gurūs often led to a contradiction of the teachings of Gurū Nānak. One such example is the construction of the *bāoli* 'well' at Goindwal (later to become a place of pilgrimage) by Gurū Amardās. The *bāoli* constructed at Goindwal suggests overtones of Hindu pilgrim centres. Significantly, it was to be reached by 84 steps – indicative of the popular Hindu view that an individual is reborn 8,400,000 times (84 *lakhs*) before *mukti* is gained. In contradiction to the suggestion that the *bāoli* was a means of pilgrimage in the Sikh faith, is the view that it was constructed for thirsty Sikhs who visited the centre of Goindwal. Nevertheless Gurū Amardās *had* established a *tīrath* (pilgrimage centre) for Sikhs at Goindwal. It was constructed for the very reason of giving Sikhs a pilgrimage centre of their own to offset their going to predominantly Hindu sites such as Hardwar and the Ganges. This, however, was in significant contrast to Gurū Nānak's teaching that pilgrimage was unnecessary. Yet, and importantly, one should not overlook the fact that in his compositions, Gurū Amardās spoke about the inferiority of pilgrimage compared to the superiority of one who concentrates on the Word of God, *gurbāṇī*.

By no means this dirt of ego is washed off, even though one may have ablutions at hundreds of places of pilgrimage. (AG 39)²⁰

It is only by meditation on the Name of God, Gurū Amardās taught, that the individual is spiritually cleansed (AG 33). Therefore, it is likely that the *bāoli* was constructed to deter Sikhs from visiting Hindu places of worship, an overt illustration of Gurū Amardās' intention of providing Sikhs with a distinct identity from Hindus.

Gurū Amardās also established the *mañjī* system. It is clear that the establishment of *mañjīs* helped to promote the Sikh faith. Their origin can be traced back to Gurū Nānak who left a *saigat* wherever he went, each *saigat* being left in the charge of a Sikh who was appointed by Gurū Nānak himself.²¹

Since Gurū Amardās could not, single-handedly, see to the needs of the Sikh community, the leaders of the *mañjīs* were given the privilege of being able to initiate members through *charanamrit*.²² *Mañjī* literally means an Indian bedstead which, when used by the Gurū, symbolized authority. The precise reason for having named the system as *mañjī* is not quite clear; it is suggested that in India when a holy man or gurū is addressing an audience he sits on a higher level, usually a *mañjī*, than the audience, who usually sit on the floor. Hence the term *mañjī* may be used in this sense as designating authority over the *saṅgat* of a particular locality. It came to refer to the system whereby the whole of the Sikh community was assigned under 22 leaders, chosen by Gurū Amardās, each having a district of his own. In order to check the progress of the *mañjīs*, Gurū Amardās made it compulsory for their leaders to gather once a year on *baisākhī* at Goindwal, this would also enable the leaders to exchange ideas and comments with each other, thus, enabling effective development of a distinct Sikh identity. It was decided that a great annual *melā*, fair, would be held at Goindwal each *baisākhī*. Eventually Gurū Amardās required Sikhs to meet twice a year at Goindwal, on *baisākhī* and *dīwālī*. The motive behind meeting on these two festivals was to promote the idea of Sikh distinctiveness from Hindus. Sikhs were required to meet on the Hindu festive days, but for non-Hindu reasons. Clearly, the need for establishing a distinct Sikh identity is seen here. Further moves towards a Sikh identity were promoted by Gurū Amardās in his composition of the *Goindval Pothis*.²³ Gurū Amardās probably recognized the fact that, since many Sikhs had Hindu ancestors, popular Hinduism was not totally absent from the *Panth*. If measures were not taken to promote explicitly the nature of the teachings of Gurū Nānak as distinct from the established *truth* of the Hindu *Vedas*²⁴ then the *Vedas* would gain unnecessary reverence among the *Panth*. The *Goindval Pothis* also catered for the needs of the scattered *saṅgats*. What is definite is that the Sikhs were no longer to consult the Hindu scriptures.²⁵

A significant assertion of a distinct Sikh identity is further illustrated by the institutions made by the fifth Gurū. By establishing *Harmandir Sāhib*²⁶ as the central place for Sikhs, and installing the *Ādi Granth*²⁷ within it, Gurū Arjan provided both a spiritual centre and an authoritative scripture for the Sikhs. Although a number of *pothis* containing the teachings of the Gurūs were already in existence, these were collaborated with the addition of hymns from Hindu and Muslim saints in the inauguration of the *Ādi Granth*.²⁸ In having a scripture of their own, the Sikhs no longer needed to utilize either the *Vedas* or other Hindu scriptures, or the *Qurān* – an assertion *per se* of the moves towards establishing Sikh distinction from Hindus and Muslims. Thus, Gurū Arjan was, in effect, firmly establishing a new community. His teachings illustrate well his attitude towards Hindu and Muslim customs:

I practise not fasting, nor observe I the month of Ramzan ...

I go not on pilgrimage to Mecca, nor worship I at the holies. (AG 1136)²⁹

From this period onwards a marked development of exclusive Sikh identity was beginning to take form. It was after the martyrdom of Gurū Arjan by the Mughals that the *Panth*'s development experienced a turning-point by taking on a specifically militant nature, and stressing its distinction from the Muslim persecutors. The first moves towards militancy were heralded by Gurū Hargobind who was commanded by his father, Gurū Arjan, to sit on the throne fully armed. Gurū Hargobind introduced the concept of *mūrī-pīrī* – the temporal and spiritual authority of the Gurū. But it was the *Khālsā* of Gurū Gobind Singh that *sealed* the distinct Sikh identity.

Sikh Identity in the Period of Gurū Gobind Singh Until 1849

Gurū Gobind Singh's institution of the *Khālsā*³⁰ at the *baisākhi* festival in 1699 made it compulsory for Sikhs to wear five outward symbols, the Five Ks, at all times. Those wishing to become devout followers of the ten Gurūs were now initiated by the ceremony of *khaṇḍe-ḍī-pāhul*, whereby initiates were to drink holy water that had been stirred by the *khaṇḍā*, rather than initiation via *charanamrit*, by which Gobind Singh had previously been initiated. The event was critically important for Sikhism since the formation of the *Khālsā* endeavoured to provide Sikhs with a final distinct identity from both Hindus and Muslims, as much by outward appearance as inward philosophy.

According to tradition, Gurū Gobind Singh asked for five men who would be willing to accept death and would be ready to be decapitated. One by one five men stood up and were in turn taken into a tent. The congregation assumed that the *pañj pyāre* had been killed, but to their astonishment the five appeared all dressed in the Five Ks. They were initiated by Gurū Gobind by the ceremony known as *khaṇḍe-ḍī-pāhul*, whereby a mixture of water and sugar crystals was stirred by a *khaṇḍā* and consumed by the *pañj pyāre*, symbolizing their spiritual transformation from sparrows into hawks. Whether the whole of this event is historically true or whether it has been telescoped cannot be ascertained. But, this is the view generally held by the *Panth*.

The insistence on the irrelevance of *avatārs*, and of caste, and on independence from *brāhmaṇic* rituals – all criticized by Gurū Gobind Singh – was designed to distinguish Sikhs from Hindus. The institution of a ban on eating *halāl* meat was intended to distinguish them clearly from Muslims. Further measures to define Sikhs clearly as separate from Muslims are contained in the much later *Rehat Maryādā*, where it explicitly states that Sikh women should not practise *purdāh*, the custom by which Muslim women completely veil themselves. Whether the turban was actually instituted by Gurū Gobind Singh as part of the *rahit* (the *Khālsā* code of discipline) on *baisākhi*

1699, cannot be determined. It is not possible to verify precise historical events that led to the turban being a visible feature of the *kesdhārī* Sikh. Although the turban is not one of the Five Ks, pictorial representations of all ten Sikh Gurūs, and of the *pañj pyāre* show them adorned with the turban. Indeed, today, the turban is a distinguishable feature of all *kesdhārī* Sikh males. There is no objection to females wearing a turban. However, its prominence is displayed among Sikh males. An exception are the *gorā* Sikh women. Four major prohibitions, to be followed by all Sikhs were laid down by Gurū Gobind Singh:

- 1 to abstain from cutting any hair,
- 2 not to smoke or take any intoxicants,
- 3 refrain from eating *halāl* meat, and
- 4 never to indulge in adultery, thus displaying high morality and virtuosity at all times.³¹

Important questions arising from the issue of Sikh identity is what incentive led to Gurū Gobind Singh formulating the *Khālsā* with its outward symbolism? Why was there a particular need for such specific Sikh identity at this time? One thing for sure is that this historical event led to a greater awareness of the presence of Sikhs by other religious communities of the time. There is some evidence to suggest that Gurū Gobind Singh did not instigate all the rules and regulations of the *Khālsā* at that *baisākhī* festival in 1699, but that they were added at different times later and telescoped into one event.³² This view is strengthened by McLeod who is of the opinion that, although an actual code of discipline may safely be attributed to *baisākhī* 1699, other aspects of the *Khālsā* are to be regarded as consequences of later events.³³ Certain features may, indeed, have been added to the original *rahīt* of Gurū Gobind Singh. This is because the *rahīt* was not written down immediately until the appearance of formal rules and regulations in the form of the *rahitnāmās* (these were the first written records of the *rahīt*, however, their authenticity is doubted), therefore, tradition may not be accurate.

Interestingly, Gurū Gobind Singh's use of the term *Khālsā* applied to *amritdhārīs* and *sahajdhārīs* – Sikhs who have not undergone the *amrit* initiation, and are, therefore, under no obligation to wear the Five Ks. The latter had taken *khaṇḍe-dī-pāhul* and thereby became Singhs, whereas the former were non-Singhs. So the term *Khālsā* was used generally to refer to *all* followers of Gurū Gobind Singh, whether *amritdhārī* or not.³⁴ This view is strengthened by Bhāi Harbans Lal; who writes: 'In the Sikh heritage, Sahajdharis were defined and treated as Sikhs in all meanings and senses because they accepted the ten Gurus as their mentors and continued the same relationship with *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*'.³⁵ He goes on to assert that: 'The Khalsa congregation included all Sikhs, Amritdhari and Sahajdhari. There were many prominent Sahajdhari Sikhs'.³⁶ Therefore, Gurū Gobind Singh did not regard only *Khālsā* Sikhs as *proper* Sikhs – though this certainly obscures the issue of the importance of

outward identity. I suggest that the Gurū recognized that not all his followers could retain strict adherence to the *rahit* and that many, nevertheless, lived up to the ideals of Gurū Nānak who had spoken against an outward show of faith. What were the reasons behind Gurū Gobind Singh's institution of the *Khālsā*?

It is clear that Gurū Gobind Singh felt the urgent need to lay down the precepts of the Sikh faith in the form of outward symbolism that would create among his followers a sense of separate identity, primarily from the followers of Islam. The urgent need to distinguish *Khālsā* Sikhs from Muslims lay in the fact that Sikhs were being persecuted for being followers of the Gurūs. Therefore, Gurū Gobind Singh probably wished for the distinction to be between Sikhs and Muslims. The Punjab, being the gateway to India, was continuously invaded by foreigners who were not always accommodating to the faith of the region they invaded. There are many accounts in Sikh history which illustrate that for those who did not convert to Islam, the penalty was death.

With regard to the distinction from Hindus, the issue is not very clear since many Hindu families included Sikh initiates. Many people kept the outward symbols of the Sikh faith without being formally initiated: such was the case of the uninitiated *kesdhārīs*: the case of the majority of the *Panth* today. The rules by which a Sikh should behave, a substantial amount of which were probably dictated in 1699, became the *rahit*, that is, it was the correct way of living for those who followed the teachings of the ten Gurūs. The precepts laid down became the basis of the *rahitnāmās* and, later, the *Rehat Maryādā*.

One of the motives behind the formation of the *Khālsā* had been the martyrdom of the tenth Gurū's father, Gurū Tegh Bahādur, who was publicly beheaded in Delhi under the reign of the Muslim Emperor, Aurangzeb.³⁷ Significantly, two disguised low-caste Sikhs managed to take the severed head of Gurū Tegh Bahādur to his son Gobind. This resulted in mass conversions of lower castes into the Sikh faith, as is expanded on in [Chapter Five](#) of this book. The very fact that the Sikhs had come in disguise, however, when it was dark, meant that they were not courageous enough to admit to the Muslim rulers that they were Sikhs, for fear of persecution or of being forced to embrace Islam. Importantly, their having come in disguise suggests that, prior to the creation of the *Khālsā*, Sikhs were, indeed, visibly recognizable, otherwise why would the two Sikhs feel the need for the disguise? For the next 24 years Gurū Gobind Singh probably trained his followers in bravery and courage, and instilled in them the power to confront the Mughal authorities.

On keeping the outward identity of the *Khālsā* (especially the uncut hair covered by the turban), Sikhs were to be recognized at once as strong, martial followers of the Sikh faith. The most important outward symbol that enabled Sikh identity to express itself was thus the turban, which became the hallmark of a Sikh. Hence, one could clearly distinguish a Sikh and a non-Sikh. This outward, militant transformation of the *Panth*, as noted earlier, could be said

to have begun under the sixth Gurū, Hargobind, the final and full transformation being attributed to Gurū Gobind Singh. Importantly, institutionalization does not indicate that Gurū Nānak's message was contradicted, but merely that it enabled the message to adapt to changing conditions in order for it to survive. The followers of the succeeding Gurūs became known collectively as the *Panth* and Gurū Nānak's name was dropped to indicate that followers were adherents to the teachings of *all* the Gurūs.³⁸ This might suggest that later innovations by Gurū Nānak's successors are to be regarded on a par with Gurū Nānak's beliefs and practices.

The need for establishing a *rahit* by Gurū Gobind Singh was also partly the outcome of the increasing number of Sikhs in the Punjab, which made it impossible for the Gurū to attend all areas. The establishment of *masands* had already proved unsuccessful, since the Gurū had felt the need to abolish them. It was necessary, therefore, to establish a set pattern of practices by which all Sikhs should behave. Above all, prescribed rules by the tenth Gurū ensured the survival of the *Panth*. The *Khālsā* established by Gurū Gobind Singh thus went as far as possible in defining Sikh identity in the seventeenth century.

Prior to his death in 1708, Gurū Gobind Singh instructed Banda Bahadur (originally known as Madho Das) to lead the *Panth*. Banda Bahadur was victorious in many battles against the Mughal authorities.³⁹ However, his execution by the Mughal authorities in 1716 resulted in mass executions of *Khālsā* Sikhs in the Punjab. As a result, significant numbers of Sikhs abandoned the *Khālsā* form in fear of persecution from the Mughals. Therefore, the number of *sahajdhārīs* grew substantially.

Eventually, in 1799, Mughal power in the Punjab was destroyed. Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh became ruler of central and western Punjab, Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar – collectively referred to as the Sikh Empire.⁴⁰ Although Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh took pride in his Sikh heritage, he was not religiously orientated. Nevertheless, one of his contributions towards Sikhism is the covering of *Harmandir Sahib* in gold leaf, hereafter, therefore, it was referred to as the Golden Temple. The Sikhs flourished under Sikh Rule.⁴¹ It was during the latter period of Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh's rule, as is illustrated in [Chapter Three](#) of this book, that sects such as the Namdhārīs arose. This immediately draws attention to the fact that the *Khālsā* way of life probably lapsed considerably in order for sectarian groups to have had substantial followings in view of their efforts to accentuate the *Khālsā* form.

Sikhs continued to practise Hindu customs and there was no marked distinction between a Sikh and a Hindu. The threat of Sikhs absorbing into Hinduism was recognized by the late nineteenth-century Singh Sabhā: an extremely important movement with regard to influencing Sikhs to establish a distinct identity of their own. Furthermore, the movement aspired to discourage diversity within the *Panth*. The first Singh Sabhā was established at Amritsar in 1873. Significantly, the early Singh Sabhās were primarily geared

towards laying down correct observances of *gurbāṇī* and there was not much emphasis on Sikhs adopting the *Khālsā* form. The prescribing of *Khālsā* ideals was accentuated by the later Singh Sabhās.⁴² Thus, diversity of identity obtained widely, whereby both *amritdhārīs* and *sahajdhārīs* were members of the *Khālsā*. The problem of defining a Sikh as belonging to a sect of Hinduism is one that Sikhs have faced throughout the development of their faith. The reasons as to why the *Khālsā* identity was stressed in the late nineteenth century, and why becoming *amritdhārī* was viewed as the mark of the *true* Sikh, are discussed below.

The Late Nineteenth Century and the Subsequent Rise of the Singh Sabhā

After the annexation of the Punjab, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General, is reported to have been impressed with the fighting qualities of Sikhs, thus encouraging Sikh enrolment into the British Army of the Raj.⁴³ Significantly, the barracks of the Raj were moved to the Punjab. Consciously, the British Army promoted enrolment of *amritdhārī* Sikhs, due to the aura of courage and bravery associated with the Five Ks. Interestingly, all Sikh soldiers were required to undertake initiation into the *Khālsā* and thereby display the Five Ks.⁴⁴ The Sikh community was indispensable to the Raj, which even enlisted the help of *granthīs* to administer *amrit* to new officers and to ensure no breach of the *Khālsā* symbols took place. The British seemed truly to believe that the prowess of the Sikh was inseparable from his outward *Khālsā* appearance. Thus, the British were, in effect, promoting Sikh identity as constituting the *amritdhārīs*. For the British army, the definition of a Sikh was a *Khālsā* Sikh.⁴⁵

Interestingly, in the Punjab census of 1855 Sikhs were still counted as members of the Hindu faith.⁴⁶ The non-distinctiveness of the Sikhs had also been voiced by Wilson, who, in 1862, depicted the Sikhs as a sect within Hinduism and the Sikh faith as a reform movement that arose in denial of caste distinctions.⁴⁷ Wilson made the assumption that there were no major distinctions between a Sikh and a Hindu. But his book was written before the census of 1868 in which, for the first time, Sikhs were counted as separate from Hindus, and before the attack of the *Ārya Samāj* – a Hindu party that refused to acknowledge the Sikhs as distinct from Hindus. However, there was no clear-cut definition of a Sikh as yet. The British enumerators felt the need for firm boundaries as to who was a Sikh in order for them to enumerate Sikhs in the 1891 Punjab census; this must have had its effect on the minds of the Singh Sabhā leaders. Hence, it was in 1891 that the first, clear, definition of a Sikh was used by the British as one who was a *Khālsā* Sikh. The number of *Khālsā* Sikhs must have visibly increased for them to have bearing on the British definition of a Sikh, an important consideration when bearing in mind that the Lahore Singh Sabhā, which placed emphasis on the *Khālsā* form, had

by now been established. Thus, the *sahajdhārīs* were most likely to have been enumerated as Hindus: significantly a total of 1,344,862 Sikhs had referred to themselves as being Hindus.⁴⁸ The *sahajdhārī/amritdhārī* relationship to the *Panth* continues to be the centre of debate to the present day.

By the nineteenth century, the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses was increasingly appearing in Sikh practice.⁴⁹ Members of the *Panth* openly participated in practices against which the Sikh Gurūs had voiced their criticism. Thus Sikhs participated in what Oberoi, using Weber's term, describes as the 'enchanted universe'.⁵⁰ The day-to-day lives of a vast majority of Sikhs consisted in anti-Sikh rituals such as the worshipping of saints from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, superstitions, black magic and the worshipping of ancestors.⁵¹ Thus, in the nineteenth century, the Sikhs were not just a people of the 'Book', *brāhmīns* were being consulted, and rituals were undertaken to prevent illnesses and to grant boons. But these accepted and popular customs of the Sikhs in the nineteenth century were in contradistinction to their *gurbāṇī*. The diversity in practices was perhaps best illustrated via the marriage ceremonies among Sikhs. Indeed, before the intervention of the Singh Sabhā there was no uniform Sikh wedding ritual. The majority of Sikhs were married by the *vedī* tradition whereby circuits (*pheras*) were taken around the fire, as in the Hindu manner. In October 1909, the Anand Marriage Act was legalized. From then on, Sikhs were to be married by taking four *pheras* around the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. The Nāmdhārīs, however, did not adopt this practice, they continue to take *pheras* around the fire to the present day (as illustrated in [Chapter Three](#)).

The writings of travellers to India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provide further useful insights into such praxis common amongst Sikhs. One example, here, is from the writings of Jacquemont: 'The Sikhs have also retained a large number of Hindu superstitions ... Their priests are always of high caste Hindu descent and they have such contempt for the lower castes ...'⁵² Furthermore, in spite of the event which had taken place on *baisākhī* 1699, there were still many Sikhs who had not yet taken *amrit* and had not, therefore, initiated into the *Khālsā*. Thus, diversity in the *Panth* with regard to practice and belief was prevalent and had been pertinent to all stages of early development, this is what the Singh Sabhā leaders aimed to end. Nevertheless, although it was inescapable that popular Sikh religion was heavily influenced by Hindu culture, this was not the case overall; the Gurūs had, indeed, promoted the distinctiveness of the *Panth*, and this was practised by the 'elite of the Panth'.⁵³ Even so, the whole *Panth* did not live strictly according to Sikh practices alone. If they had, then there would have been less effort on behalf of the Singh Sabhā to define Sikhs clearly as distinct from other faiths.

The Singh Sabhā sought to publish literature that would unite all Sikhs in belief and practice and end Sikh participation in the 'enchanted universe'. The printing press had been introduced by the American Ludhiana Mission in 1834,

and cannot be overestimated in the efforts of the Singh Sabhā: it allowed ideas to be effectively communicated between the Punjabis.⁵⁴

Although many *rahitnāmās* and *tankhāhnāmās* (works that state prohibitions for *Khālsā* Sikhs and action to be taken against those *Khālsā* Sikhs who break the *rahit*) were in existence, their authority was not particularly marked in the nineteenth century; none was seen as having utmost jurisdiction for the Sikh community. It is well to remember that the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* was not officially approved by the SGPC until 1945. Thus, the extant formal *rahitnāmās* of various authors were utilized by the Singh Sabhā in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the educated leaders of the Singh Sabhā could not accept all *rahitnāmā* material because of discrepancies and substance that was no longer relevant in the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Therefore, much of the content of the *rahitnāmās* was sifted for what the Singh Sabhā leaders saw as reliable material, in order for the *Panth* to be defined as being distinct from Hindus and Muslims.

Indeed, much of what became the definitive *Sikh Rehat Maryādā* is derived from the *rahitnāmās*, which are the first records of the *rahit* as instituted by Gurū Gobind Singh on *baisākhī* 1699 when he created the *Khālsā*. Notably, the aim of the *Sikh Rehat Maryādā* is to provide a code for *Khālsā* Sikhs, therefore, it does not see the need to cater for *sahajdhārī*, uninitiated Sikhs. The earliest extant *rahitnāmā* is that, allegedly, by Chaupa Singh Chhibbar, known as the Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā*. Chaupa Singh was born as Chaupa Rai into a *brāhmin* family and is likely to have taken initiation and thereby become a *Khālsā* Sikh in order for his name to have changed to Chaupa Singh.⁵⁶ Sikh tradition claims that Gurū Gobind Singh had instructed Chaupa Singh, a close companion of the Gurū, to write down the *Khālsā* code of discipline as instructed to Sikhs on *baisākhī* 1699. This would have been necessary since the *Khālsā* community would have been growing and dispersing to the extent that it would have been impossible for the Gurū to attend to all *Khālsā* Sikhs. Therefore, a written statement would have been vital in order for the Gurū's chosen associates to be able to administer *khaṇḍe-dī-pahūl* on his behalf.

The authenticity of the Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* (dating between 1740 and 1765)⁵⁷ however, is doubtful. It contains material that would not have been acceptable to Chaupa Singh himself. He was the tutor of the tenth Gurū and had looked after him as a child. Neither he, nor the Gurū himself, would have accepted much of its substance. This includes reverence and superiority of the *brāhmīns*, as well as the tenth Gurū's involvement in the *devī* cult. Furthermore, the extant Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* contains no reference to the Five Ks. Additionally the language used is not that of the period of the tenth Gurū.⁵⁸ It follows that the opinion of many Sikhs and scholars today ascertains that much of the original Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* has been distorted by ignorant Sikhs.⁵⁹ The Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* can be attributed to Chhibbar *brāhmīns* who were not very happy with the *Khālsā Panth* development in the eighteenth century.⁶⁰

The *rahit* was a continuing process, although, much of it had been dictated by the tenth Gurū in 1699. According to McLeod, 'pre-1699 sources indicate that a rudimentary Rahit was evolving prior to the founding of the Khalsa'.⁶¹ But much of it evolved in the post-*Khālsā* period during the eighteenth century. Thus, although the extant Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* is often regarded as unauthentic, its importance lies in the fact that it is closer to the period of Gurū Gobind Singh than any other *rahitnāmā*. Nevertheless, certain features of the extant Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* would not have been accepted by the Singh Sabhā, which aimed to end Sikh participation in the 'enchanted universe'. For example, it includes the reference that:

(iii) Sikh marriages should be performed by Brahmins.⁶²

Such factors suggested that the Sikhs were not distinct from Hindus. Therefore, the Singh Sabhā solemnized the *Anand Kāraj* Act in 1909. The elevation of *brahmins*, against which the Gurūs taught, was further stressed by references in the Chaupa Singh *Rahitnāmā* that '(iv) Brahman Sikhs should receive double the deference and attention normally bestowed on a Sikh'.⁶³ As a result, the Singh Sabhā endeavoured to produce a set of rules and regulations for Sikhs to follow.

It was the goal of the Singh Sabhā to create a consciousness of identity among Sikhs, an identity that created a *Khālsā* view and one that clearly emphasized to Sikhs that they are in no way to be regarded as belonging to Hinduism. The Singh Sabhā, according to Harbans Singh, is undoubtedly responsible for the *purification* of the Sikh faith.⁶⁴ This becomes clear when bearing in mind the following aims of the Singh Sabhā, as illustrated by Gopal Singh:

- a to propagate the Guru's Mission in its pristine purity;
- b to do away with the Brahmanic rituals which had crept (*sic*) into the Sikh society;
- c to publish books;
- d to hold discussions and debates of scholars of doctrine...
- e to inculcate pride in the Sikh youth in their tradition and history; and
- f to propagate the cause of the Panjabi language by opening schools and publishing books, journals and newspapers.⁶⁵

The efforts of the Singh Sabhā in this respect have been succinctly summarized by Oberoi:

A separatist 'Sikh history' was matched by a vigorous drive to establish distinct Sikh rituals and observations for life cycle ceremonies. This was furthered by the substitution of non-Sikh festivals by Sikh celebrations. Central to this concern with the rites of passage was the desire to rid Sikhism of all Brahmanical-Hinduized accretions.⁶⁶

But diversity was present among the Singh Sabhās themselves. The earlier Sabhās of Amritsar differed from the later Sabhās of Lahore. Attempts at enforcing *Khālsā* ideals became noticeable among the *Khālsā* Panth.

The establishment of a branch of the *Ārya Samāj* at Lahore, Punjab, in 1877 posed a particular threat to the survival of Sikhism. The Singh Sabhā spoke against the *Ārya Samāj*'s attempt to define Sikhs as simply belonging to the Hindu faith. Propaganda stimulated by the Singh Sabhā aimed at a stricter following of the *Khālsā*.⁶⁷ The assumption that Sikhs are to be regarded as Hindus was outrightly rejected by the Singh Sabhā; indeed, Nabha's famous work entitled *We Are Not Hindus*, is one of its basic books. Nabha's work was the most authoritative statement of Sikh identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁶⁸

But links between Punjabis, both Sikh and Hindu, would have been inevitable since they shared the same family and same *zāts*, including shared customs and festivals.⁶⁹ Above all, the Sikh Gurūs themselves were originally Punjabi Hindus too. However, the Sikh break from Hinduism was evident in the Gurūs' rejection of *zāt* prejudice, of *brāhmanic* rituals, and of the polytheism that was a popular feature of devotional Hinduism. It was, ironically, the teachings of the *Ārya Samāj* itself that helped to promote an awareness of a distinct identity among Sikhs. The *Ārya Samāj*'s insistence on defining Sikhs as being Hindus drove the Singh Sabhā to emphatically denounce any Hindu identity of Sikhs.⁷⁰

The *Ārya Samāj*, led by Swami Dayanand, preached the supremacy of the *Vedas* and, in so doing, the idolatrous and polytheistic nature of popular Hinduism was rejected. Moreover, Dayanand condemned the authority of *brāhmins*. Thus in these non-Hindu aspects the *Ārya Samāj* had appealed to the educated Punjabis and, initially at least, to a number of Sikhs. However, on his arrival in the Punjab, Dayanand openly criticized the Sikh religion, as well as its Gurūs as being mere mortals who had begun their own sect within the overall boundary of Hinduism.

The stringent followers of the *Ārya Samāj* viewed Dayanand as a *ṛṣi*, before whom Gurū Nānak and the Gurūs could never be placed in importance. The first Sikh followers of the *Ārya Samāj* initially accepted it as being similar to the *true* Sikhism as taught by the Gurūs. Nevertheless, Dayanand's open criticism of the Sikh faith could not be tolerated by those who followed the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs. The *Ārya Samāj* lost the majority of its Sikh followers, who became ardent supporters of the Singh Sabhā movement.⁷¹ The effect of the *Ārya Samāj* in the Punjab was, in fact, to raise among Sikhs the necessity of a clear identity of their own. The criticism of the *Ārya Samāj* had created an increased awareness among Sikhs that they were not a minority sect within Hinduism. So what and who were they to be identified as?

The influence of Christian missionaries in the Punjab also prompted the Singh Sabhā to take swift action. Sikhs had been greatly shocked when, in 1853,

Mahārājā Duleep Singh became a Christian.⁷² It was the egalitarian message that attracted large numbers of lower-caste Sikhs into Christianity, and they constituted the highest percentage of Sikhs converting into the Christian faith. Although Sikhism had claimed to be casteless, these low-caste Sikhs did not achieve the position of equality that the Gurūs had preached, as is discussed in [Chapter Four](#). Significantly, the decision of four educated Sikhs to convert to Christianity came as a great blow to the Singh Sabhā, which recognised the dire need to do something about Sikh conversions to Christianity.

In around 1902–3, a number of the Sabhās had affiliated into a central organization known as the Chief *Khālsā Dīwān*. Generally, the Chief *Khālsā Dīwān*, like the earlier Sabhās, tended to regard both *Khālsā* Sikhs and *sahajdhārīs* as Sikhs.⁷³ The later Singh Sabhās were responsible for the establishment of the *Tat Khālsā*, translated as ‘Pure Sikhs’, which insisted on the identity of a Sikh as being a *Khālsā* Sikh. It is the influences of the Singh Sabhās, which formulated as the *Tat Khālsā*, that are echoed in the pages of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, issued by the SGPC at Amritsar in 1945.

Importantly, the Singh Sabhā was not alone in attempting to revitalize the lapsed *Panth*. There were a number of movements, as noted earlier, that arose in the nineteenth century as the need towards adherence to Sikh teachings and principles became necessary. Indeed, the rise of these movements suggests that a separate Sikh identity was not clear-cut, and that the continuation of the *Panth* was viewed as being in danger. Groups such as the Nāmdhārīs (examined in [Chapter Three](#)), together with the Lahore Singh Sabhā attempted to force the *Khālsā* Sikh identity on the *Panth*.

The year 1898 CE further heightened Sikh separatism, this time legally. The issue concerned a gentleman, Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia, who had converted to Sikhism before his death. After his death his wealth was left in a trust. His wife claimed that since he had died a Sikh, the Hindu law of inheritance no longer applied. The Punjab Court found itself in a dilemma in determining whether Sikhs were to be regarded as Hindus or as a separate faith.⁷⁴ The court’s final decision that Sardar Majithia was in fact a Hindu must have engendered considerable disappointment among the *Tat Khālsā* leaders. On the other hand, it is probable that at this point in history many Sikh converts were adamant that they wished to be labelled as within the boundaries of Hinduism. It is true to say that, even to the present day, there are some Sikhs who do not wish to create too much fuss over the issue of total separation from their Hindu background: this is bound to cause problems when discussing the overall question of Sikh identity.

The endeavour towards removing idol worship from Sikh holy places resulted in the uprooting of idols from the precincts of the Golden Temple in 1905.⁷⁵ The *Tat Khālsā* firmly endorsed the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* as the basis of all religious practices; there were to be no *brāhmīns* consulted in religious rites. All Sikhs, no matter from what *zāt*, were now to perform their own life-cycle rites

in a specifically Sikh manner. Ultimately, religious diversity was not acceptable by the *Tat Khālsā*.

Many Sikhs went their separate ways in not obeying all or some of the regulations stated by the *Tat Khālsā*, these were eventually to be stated in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. Thus diversity within the *Panth* was far from completely obliterated. If a Sikh lives as required by the *Khālsā* code, then there is no doubt concerning who a Sikh is, that is, no question of being called a Hindu. But the problem of Sikh identity continued into the twentieth century with the need for the *Gurdwārās Act*, which enabled Sikhs to gain control of their own *gurdwārās*, and the need to be able to define their religion and, ultimately, themselves. Prior to the Act the definition of a Sikh was a wide one. It is the *Gurdwārās Act of 1925 that, for the first time, legally defined a Sikh*.

The Akali Struggle and the Gurdwārās Act of 1925

Large-scale persecution of Sikhs and their *granthīs* in the eighteenth century had resulted in the management of individual *gurdwārās* coming under the control of those who were not necessarily strict adherents of the Sikh faith. The *masands*, as mentioned earlier, had been abrogated by Gurū Gobind Singh; in their place arose the *mahants*, heads of religious establishments. The *mahants* had become corrupt due to the large sums of money being offered by worshippers at the *gurdwārās*. Anti-Sikh practices were incorporated by the *mahants* into everyday worship. It is likely that they consumed alcohol while on holy premises and at many *gurdwārās* the young female attendants were often the victims of harassment.⁷⁶ Successorship in the hands of the *mahants* encouraged belief that a particular *gurdwārā* was by right their very own possession. Sikhs were openly insulted in their places of worship. For example one particular *mahant* is believed to have threatened worshippers by proposing to mix tobacco into the sacred food.⁷⁷

The *gurdwārā* holds great importance for a Sikh, since it is here that one can hear the sacred words of *gurbāṇī*, and it is here that the importance of the Sikh congregation, *saṅgat*, can be realized. The *gurdwārā* is a centre for Sikh identity where youngsters are made aware of their faith. Misuse of the *gurdwārās* by *mahants*, therefore, could not be tolerated by those who followed the teachings of the ten Gurūs. There was a danger of Sikhism being rapidly absorbed into Hinduism, and thus resulting in Sikhs losing their tenuous separate identity. The struggle to dismantle the authority of the *mahants* was led by the Akalis, the immortal Sikh Soldiers (sometimes also referred to as *Nihangs*). Previous attempts to restore the Sikh faith to its purity, as taught by the Sikh Gurūs, had been led by movements such as the Nāmdhāris, Nirankāris and the Singh Sabhā, and it has been suggested that the Akali struggle for reform in the *gurdwārās* had arisen from these provincial movements.⁷⁸ The Akali movement was

totally opposed to violence, all its protests and campaigns were carried out with a non-violent attitude. The Babbar Akali movement is a group of militant Sikhs, who broke away from the Akalis. They are seen as nationalists, who are often confused with the peaceful Akalis due to the similarity in costume of both groups. The Babbar Akalis are a later development and should be regarded as being separate from the peaceful struggle of the Akalis.

The Akali struggle, which lasted from 1920–25, arose for two major reasons: first, to eradicate the misuse of authority by the *mahants* and, second, to revolt against the British government which was giving its support to the *mahants* and denying Sikhs the right to manage their own *gurdwārās*. The British government had appointed its own managers, often in the form of the *mahants*, to control the main *gurdwārās*. In the *gurdwārās* themselves there were Hindu and Sikh rituals taking place side-by-side and, as Teja Singh aptly comments ‘any reasonable man will admit that it is impossible to perform both Hindu and Sikh rituals in the same temple’.⁷⁹ The *mahants* were responsible for destroying the nature and identity of the Sikh faith by allowing immoral and anti-Sikh practices to take place in the *gurdwārās*, and the government was, in effect, refusing Sikhs control over their religious matters. Therefore, double opposition from the British and the corrupt *mahants* necessitated the Sikhs uniting as one in their struggle for reform and control of their *gurdwārās*.

The Akalis recognized the need for a central authority that would manage the running of major *gurdwārās*. This was later to be fulfilled by the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which elected its nine members of committee on September 1921 inviting correspondence from prospective delegates. Delegates were required to satisfy the following conditions:

- 1 He must have received *Amrit* or baptism,
- 2 must be a regular reader of the scriptures,
- 3 must possess the five Ks,
- 4 must be an early riser, and
- 5 must be giving 1/10th of his income regularly for the *panthic* cause.⁸⁰

Controlling the *gurdwārās* and removing all anti-Sikh rituals from Sikh worship were the main goals of the SGPC.

The Akalis’ peaceful stance when struggling for *gurdwara* reform is highlighted in what is known as the Nankanā Tragedy. The incident to which it refers, took place at Nankanā, the birthplace of Gurū Nānak, and marks a significant turning point in the Akali Movement. Immoral practices were taking place at the *gurdwārā* in Nankanā where devotees were being harrassed by the *mahant*, Narain Das, who retained his authority in the *gurdwārā* due to the government backing he received. He refused to give in to the SGPC, arranged for a gathering of *mahants*, and stimulated *mahant* propaganda against the SGPC. He secretly began to gather weapons to use against the pacifist Akalis. A meeting was arranged between the Akalis and Narain Das

for 4 March 1921, on which day a *jathā* (group) of Akalis, who eagerly wanted to pay their respects at the *gurdwārā* at Nankanā, marched on ahead and arrived at Nankanā on 19 February 1921. Narain Das was under the impression that all the Akalis had reached Nankanā and that this was, therefore, the perfect opportunity to destroy the opposition. The *jathā* was so engrossed in singing religious hymns that they were unaware the gates behind them had been shut, and that they had been trapped by Narain Das and his armed men. The *jathā* was fired upon and not one of its members survived the foray.

The Akalis peacefully became martyrs. Narain Das was arrested, further movement towards Nankanā, by the Akalis, was initially impeded by the commissioner; but he could not deter the Akalis, who eventually took control of the *gurdwārā*. The result was that other *mahants* surrendered to the Akalis and accepted the authority of the SGPC to whom the keys of the *gurdwārās* were given.⁸¹ This attack at Nankanā awakened in Sikhs an awareness of the urgency to gain control of their places of worship. The government's involvement at Nankanā cannot be overestimated: it wanted to retain its control over the *gurdwārās*, but rather than coming into direct confrontation with the Sikhs, used the *mahants* as a means. Overall expulsion of the *mahants* was not possible until the government withdrew its support from them.

The Akali struggle for *gurdwārā* reform against the government was also the issue of the Keys Affair. Although the management of the Amritsar Golden Temple, the *Akal Takht*⁸² and adjoining *gurdwārās* had come under the control of the SGPC in October 1920, the keys to the Golden Temple were retained by the polity. This could not be tolerated by the Akalis who demanded that the keys be given to Sikhs themselves. The president of the SGPC had asked Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgharia, the government-appointed manager, to hand over the keys of the *gurdwārā* to him. There was a great disturbance among the Akalis when they discovered that the deputy commissioner had sent his men to Ramgharia's house to collect the keys. Protests were carried out by the Akalis that subsequently resulted in a whole group of Akalis being arrested. The state's actions in taking the keys were the cause of much agitation. The government knew fully that once total authority was given to the Akalis, the SGPC would have total dominance among the Sikhs in the Punjab. Sikhs were encouraged not to come to any compromise with the government over the Keys Affair until all Akalis held in prison were released. Negotiations on the part of the British proved futile, they had finally to give in to the Akalis and release all arrested members unconditionally. The Akalis had defeated the government on this issue and effectively gained total control over the Golden Temple. Mahatma Gandhi expressed his joy on this occasion and sent the following telegram to the president of the SGPC 'First battle for India's freedom won. Congratulations'.⁸³ The British suffered a considerable loss of

prestige over the Keys Affair since it was a British officer himself who travelled to the president of the SGPC to hand over the keys.

After the Akalis had taken control of another *gurdwārā*, referred to as *Gurū-kā-bāgh*, they had won their second victory over the government and were on their way to a complete reformation of the Sikh *gurdwārās* and, thus, towards their task of giving the Sikhs an identity of their own.

The Shromañī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee

The authority of the SGPC to control the major *gurdwārās* was finally realized. The peaceful struggle of the Akalis for *gurdwārā* reform ended on 6 August 1925, with the Sikh *gurdwārās* and Shrines Act being enforced on 1 November 1925. The major aims of the SGPC were:

- i to bring the Sikh religious places under *panthic* control and management,
- ii to do away with the permanent position of the *Mahants*, thus ending their irresponsibility,
- iii to utilise the property and income of the *gurdwārās* for the purposes for which they were founded, and
- iv to practise the Sikh religion according to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as preserved in the *Adi Granth*.⁸⁴

The *Sikh Gurdwārās Act of 1925* defined a Sikh as follows:

‘Sikh’ means a person who professes the Sikh religion or, in the case of a deceased person, who professed the Sikh religion or was known to be a Sikh during his lifetime.⁸⁵

If any question arises as to whether any living person is or is not a Sikh, he shall be deemed respectively to be or not to be a Sikh according as he makes or refuses to make in such manner as the State Government may prescribe the following declaration:

*I solemnly affirm that I am a Sikh, that I believe in the Guru Granth Sahib, that I believe in the Ten Gurus, and that I have no other religion.*⁸⁶

The declaration ‘I have no other religion’ is very interesting since it clearly defines that a Sikh should not follow the traditions or customs of any other faith. The most obvious distinction is from Hindus and Muslims. Therefore, the followers of the ten Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* have a *distinct* identity from Hindus.

So for 20 years, that is until the description of a Sikh was redefined in 1945, the definition of a Sikh was a broad one, with no pronounced emphasis on the outward form. Rather, it stressed a Sikh as being one who accepted the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and believed in the ten Gurūs. *Khālsā* observation, therefore, was

not prompted until 1945. A significant reason for this more overt *Khālsā* orientation may be attributed to the fact that Sikhs, although professing to no other religion, were continually being referred to as a sect of Hindus, thus, necessitating the outward form. This seems to suggest that the issue of Sikh identity was, indeed, becoming more critical towards the mid-twentieth century, and caused the Shromaṇī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee to impose a stronger awareness of the *Khālsā* signs.

The *Gurdwārās Act* came into existence as the result of the Akalis' awareness of the external threats to Sikhism, especially from the corrupt practices of the *mahants*. A forceful assertion of Sikh identity was needed because it was felt that Sikhism was gradually being absorbed into Hinduism. Therefore, in addition to defining who a Sikh was, it was also necessary to define the beliefs of a Sikh, which were becoming continually obscured with the practices of the two faiths being performed at the same time in the same shrine. Sikhism and its followers needed to be defined for the survival of the Sikh faith among future generations. Accordingly, Sikh associations such as the Akalis and the *Tat Khālsā*, along with prominent scholars, decided to formulate a set of rules and regulations according to which all followers of the Sikh faith should behave and live. These rules were collectively gathered and approved by the SGPC on 3 February 1945 and formed the *Rehat Maryādā*, a guide to how a *Khālsā* Sikh should behave and live. The *Rehat Maryādā*, therefore, as previously indicated, reflects a strong influence of the ideals of the *Tat Khālsā*, as well as the Akali movement.

The Case for Corporate Identity: the *Rehat Maryādā*

The *Rehat Maryādā* is authoritative in defining who a Sikh is. It is in the *Rehat Maryādā* that the definition of a Sikh, first stated in the *Gurdwārās Act* 1925, becomes more developed. I reiterate that the precedent for the majority of the *rahit* was set out by Gurū Gobind Singh when he initiated the *pañj pyāre* at the first *Khālsā* ceremony. By instructing the *pañj pyāre* to drink from the same vessel, Gurū Gobind Singh emphasized the idea of equality among the Sikh followers and this suggests a certain levelling and conformity in the issue of identity. But how far has the *Tat Khālsā* ideal actually succeeded in creating uniformity of the *Panth*? The standard set by the *Rehat Maryādā* came to impose, in aspiration, corporate identity on the Sikhs. This identity today, states that it is the *amritdhārī* who is a *true* Sikh. Therefore, the *amritdhārīs* (who are required to follow stringently the *Rehat Maryādā*) have come to constitute the *Khālsā* elite in the *Panth*. The way forward for each individual, according to the *Khālsā*, therefore, is to follow the *Rehat Maryādā* as strictly as possible.

The prominence of the *Rehat Maryādā* lies in the fact that it is consulted whenever there is uncertainty concerning how a religious ceremony should be

correctly performed. Additionally, the correct performance of ceremonies, as corroborated in the *Rehat Maryādā*, is also followed by non-*Khālsā* Sikhs. *Sahajdhārī* Sikhs undergo the *anand karāj* ceremony when getting married, and will follow the life-cycle rites as sanctioned in the pages of the *Rehat Maryādā*. In this respect therefore, the *Rehat Maryādā* crosses the boundaries of being important and exclusive to the *amritdhārīs* only. It is regarded as a guide by non-*Khālsā* Sikhs also and, therefore, is certainly relevant for them: though to what degree, is investigated below. A central area of consideration with regard to the utilization of the *Rehat Maryādā* by non-*Khālsā* Sikhs, therefore, is to what extent the *Khālsā* code constitutes correct behaviour in *their* view or, conversely, how far is there a degree of laxity in observance of the *Rehat Maryādā* by the majority of Sikhs.

Influenced by Punjabi culture, Sikhs maintain certain superstitious trends in everyday conduct. For example, although the *Rehat Maryādā* denounces superstition (RM 6 and 12), it is considered inauspicious to sneeze prior to an important event. Additionally, certain days of the week are not suitable for washing the hair. The mother pours oil in the doorway to welcome her son and his newly-wed bride. The same groom will undergo the *anand karāj* ceremony as prescribed in the *Rehat Maryādā*, and will then, first at his bride's home, and then at his parent's home, be blessed by the auspicious oil-pouring ritual. It would appear that these superstitions are influenced by continued Sikh participation in the 'enchanted universe'. It is this very non-Sikh behaviour which the *Tat Khālsā* had aimed to put an end to in order to promote a distinct Sikh identity.

These are merely some examples amongst many where both adherence to, and neglect of, the *Rehat Maryādā* takes place side-by-side the majority of Sikhs and illustrates that Punjabi customs obtain alongside, yet without backing from, the *Rehat Maryādā*. Therefore, it is true to say for the moment that, being a Sikh – uninitiated or *amritdhārī* – may not suggest being totally focused on the entire aspirations of the *Tat Khālsā* leaders. Therefore, *Khālsā* stringency, as established in the epoch of the *Tat Khālsā*, cannot be the sole criterion in terms of investigating who is a Sikh on an all-encompassing level. Other themes must be considered such as the Punjabi culture and ethnicity that form the backbone of everyday Sikh social behaviour.

The SGPC is responsible for managing *gurdwārās* in Punjab and Haryana, it has also had a degree of influence over Sikh religious places in the diaspora. The SGPC is the 'statutory committee set up by the Punjab government'⁸⁷ and in the *Rehat Maryādā* defines a Sikh as follows:

- a He should worship only one God, and should not indulge in any form of idol worship.
- b Live a life based on the teachings of the ten Gurus, the Holy Guru Granth Sahib, and other scriptures and teachings of the Gurus.

- c Sikhs should believe in the Oneness of the ten Gurus, That is, that a single soul or entity existed in the ten Gurus.
- d A Sikh should have no belief in caste, black magic, superstitious practices; such as the seeking of auspicious moments, eclipses, the practices of feeding Brahmins in the belief that the food will reach one's ancestors, ancestor's (*sic*) worship, fasting at different phases of the moon, the wearing of sacred threads and similiar rituals. ...
- e Sikhs should not cut their children's hair. Boys are to be given the name Singh and girls the name of Kaur.
- f Sikhs should not partake of alcohol, tobacco, drugs or other intoxicants ...
- g A Sikh should live his whole life according to the tenets of his faith ...
- h Any clothing may be worn by a Sikh, provided it includes a turban (for males) and a Knicker (*Kachh*) a similar garment.⁸⁸

It must be noted that the above definition of a Sikh applies to the *amritdhārī* who is, thus, a *Khālsā* member. But what about those individuals who do not obey all the requirements set out in the *Rehat Maryādā*? Do they still qualify as Sikhs? This is where the problems arise. Individuals may cut their hair, but still regard themselves as Sikhs: when judged by the yardstick of the *Rehat Maryādā* however, they are *not* Sikh. And if this is the case, what are they? It is understandable that the *Khālsā*, with its outward recognition, was seen as a necessary institution made by Gurū Gobind Singh in the face of late seventeenth-century situations of the Punjab. Additionally, as seen earlier, the *Khālsā* way of life was further promoted by the *Tat Khālsā* in order to prevent the absorption of Sikhs into Hinduism. Today, however, the *Khālsā* regulation should not, I suggest, be too binding on Sikh identity to the extent that it alienates a large portion of the *Panth*.

The prominent feature of the *Rehat Maryādā* is that it promotes specifically Sikh-orientated practices for followers of the Sikh Gurūs. It is important, therefore, because it aims to establish a distinct Sikh identity, dealing with spiritual as well as practical matters. It supports egalitarian principles in its denouncing of the caste system (RM 7 and 11) and stresses the irrelevancy of ritual and superstitious practices (RM 12). The *Rehat Maryādā* is also a spiritual guide, it states: 'A Sikh should live his whole life according to the tenets of his faith' (RM 13). It is essential that *amritdhārī* Sikhs do not cut the hair, must at all times wear the Five Ks and, amongst other regulations, rise before dawn. An *amritdhārī* who has defied the rules of the *Rehat Maryādā* becomes a *patit* and, therefore, no longer a *true* Sikh. This, then, would apply to any *amritdhārī* Sikh who cuts his or her hair. The *patit* must retake *amrit* if he or she is to become an initiated member of the community again. A *sahajdhārī* Sikh basically refers to a non-*Khālsā* Sikh, one who has not been initiated. Here, the *Rehat Maryādā* does depict the *sahajdhārī* as a Sikh, but as one who has not *yet* taken formal initiation into the *Khālsā*, though he or she follows the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs.

The position of the SGPC towards *kesdhārīs* is not very clear. A *kesdhārī* Sikh is one who, although keeping the *kes*, has not taken *amrit* and is, therefore, under no obligation to obey the rules of the *Rehat Maryādā* but follows so many of the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs. The *Rehat Maryādā* views their position as neither here nor there. A *kesdhārī*, if not *amritdhārī*, is not eligible for elections of the SGPC members, neither is the *kesdhārī* to be co-opted as a member of the SGPC. These roles can only be undertaken by an *amritdhārī* Sikh. Furthermore, a definition of a *kesdhārī* is not cited in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. Therefore, it appears that displaying the *Khālsā* symbols without having taken initiation are to no avail in the view of the SGPC. Moreover, it is *only* the *amritdhārī* who is a proper Sikh. The category or, rather, the lack of definition of what a *kesdhārī* is according to the SGPC, demonstrates very well the inability to define who a Sikh is, bearing in mind that the majority of the *Panth* fall into this category.

The aspiration of the writers of the *Rehat Maryādā*, nevertheless, is that one day the *sahajdhārī* will be initiated and become an *amritdhārī*, therefore a *true* Sikh. The *Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Act* of 1971 defines a *sahajdhārī* as a person:

- i Who professes Sikh religion, believes in one God, follows the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib and the Ten Gurus only;
- ii Who performs all ceremonies according to Sikh rites;
- iii Who does not smoke, use tobacco, kutha (Halal Meat) in any forms;
- iv Who does not take alcoholic in any forms drinks (*sic*);
- v Who is born in not Sikh family (*sic*), but not a Patit.⁸⁹

Clearly, this is not suggesting that a *sahajdhārī* is *not* a Sikh. Similarly, and interestingly, Bhāi Harbans Lal attributes the term *sahajdhārī* to all Sikhs. He remarks that the meaning of the term *sahajdhārī* depicts one ‘Who has achieved the state of Sahaj, which is a state of tranquility, bliss’.⁹⁰

But initiation is important: it is believed to help one on the path to salvation, thus the fate of those who are neither initiated nor keep the *kes* indicates no possible chance of *mukṭi*. The argument from the *Khālsā* point of view is that being a Sikh is to love all that the Gurus have instituted, this includes the *Khālsā*. In the view of *amritdhārīs*, had it not been for the Five Ks, for the outward distinct Sikh identity, Sikhism would probably have been absorbed into Hinduism a long time ago. The *Tat Khālsā* aimed at promoting this Sikh distinction by emphasizing the Five Ks and the need to become *amritdhārī*. According to the precepts of *Khālsā* Sikhism, being *gurmukh* without being an *amritdhārī* is not enough to qualify an individual for a possible union with God. On the other hand, in popular opinion, *kesdhārī* Sikhs are seen to occupy a halfway position between the *amritdhārīs* and *sahajdhārīs*. Most would regard them as Sikhs. Thus there is a marked similarity between the *amritdhārī* and the *kesdhārī*, both prominently displaying the characteristic feature of a Sikh, the turban. However, the *kesdhārī* is in sharp contrast to the *monā*, who is a shaven Sikh.

The turban itself is an object of great prestige in the eyes of a Sikh. The purpose of the turban is symbolic rather than functional.⁹¹ It is inevitable that in Sikhism the turban and *kanghā* are inseparably bound with initiation and, therefore, the *kes*. The Sikh's right to wearing a turban has widely been recognized outside India. Since wearing the turban is essential to an *amritdhārī* Sikh, efforts of legislation in the diaspora to prevent it being worn whilst riding a motorbike, and the compulsory use of a crash-helmet, were strongly opposed by members of the Sikh community. The *Road Traffic Act* of 1972 was amended in 1976 to allow British Sikhs a Religious Exemption from the Act. The *Motor-Cycle Crash-Helmets (Religious Exemption) Act* 1976 thus read as follows:

1. In section 32 of the Road Traffic Act 1972 there shall be inserted after subsection (2) the following new subsection:- “(2A) A requirement imposed by regulations under this section (whenever made) shall not apply to any follower of the Sikh religion while he is wearing a turban.”
2. This Act may be cited as the Motor-Cycle Crash-Helmets (Religious Exemption) Act 1976.⁹²

Nevertheless, there is clearly a case for a broader definition of a Sikh if one is to look at the evidence of the earliest stage of Sikhism. In the period of the *Nānak Panth*, as has been suggested above, there was no emphasis on a distinct external identity for followers of Gurū Nānak. As McLeod states: ‘What is certain is that many who claim to be Sikhs will continue to cut their hair, leaving us with the problem of how to frame a definition which accommodates both the strict *khalsa* and those who in practice set aside the *Rahit*’.⁹³

The Kes and Sikh Identity

Of major distinction, then, between Sikh and non-Sikh, especially outside India, is the Sikh's most prominent display of the turban, which is inseparably bound with the *kes*. As indicated earlier, it is not possible to establish whether the turban was part of the *rahit* of Gurū Gobind Singh, or whether it was appended to it. Although a Sikh is supposed to display all of the Five Ks at all times, a discussion of the *kaṛā*, *kanghā*, *kirpān* and *kacchā* is not otherwise relevant to the issue of Sikh identity. Thus, the issue of *kes* is particularly pertinent to the debate about Sikh identity in the sense that an individual may no longer be regarded as a Sikh if the *kes* is cut. This is because such individuals do not conform to the status of a *Khālsā* Sikh as defined by the *Rehat Maryādā*, even though they will consider themselves Sikh. Thus the question of Sikh identity appears to be a paradox.

Even with changing attitudes in the modern world, *Khālsā* Sikhism has retained its insistence on unshorn *kes*, and one must ask why such importance is attached to the *kes*. Religion has always associated uncut, long hair as a

symbol of the individual's devotion to God. For example, the biblical story of Samson in the Jewish and Christian tradition is concerned with how his hair was the source of his energy and divine strength. Jesus too, in the majority of his pictures is portrayed as having long hair. Apart from these two 'western' characters, many Hindu Gods are represented with their long, maybe uncut, hair. This portrayal of hair in both eastern and western ideology must inevitably have some significance relating to an individual's mental and spiritual state of mind.

Traditionally, the ascetics and *sadhūs* (holy men) of India have kept uncut hair. Therefore, prestige was attributed to the *kes* prior to the creation of the *Khālsā*. Importance attached to the *kes* appears to have been the topic of a conversation between Gurū Nānak and a Muslim religious leader known as Bahauddīn. According to the *Janamsākhī*s Gurū Nānak is believed to have told Bahauddīn that by shaving their hair, the Hindus and Muslims have degraded themselves. Gurū Nānak further asserts that ordaining humans with *kes*, is God's divine Will, *Hukam*, and each individual should therefore obey the *Hukam*.⁹⁴ Prestige associated with the Indian turban is also found in one of Gurū Arjan's hymns:

Let the complete body be the turban on thy head.

A Muslim is he who is kind-hearted. (AG 1084).⁹⁵

Important to note is that the turban, here, has no connection whatsoever to a Sikh identity. The last line of the verse clearly indicates that the composition belongs to *Sufīs*, not Sikhs. The *Sufīs* wore turbans along with Hindus, too, as a sign of respect. Its use is rather like a woman covering her head before leaving the house and in the presence of elders and, importantly, is therefore not exclusive to Sikhs.

Interestingly, occasional references are also made to the turban by Bhāi Gurdās. Important, however, is the fact that the turban in his references has *no* apparent connection to unshorn hair. More likely, the turban was worn by Hindus and Muslims, as well as followers of the Gurūs, as a mark of proper behaviour:

Having taken bath on the well, a person forgot his turban and returned home bare headed. Seeing his improper conduct (of being bare headed) the silly women started weeping and wailing (seeing turbanless master of the house they conjectured the death of some one in the family) ... (Then the fact was disclosed by him that he just forgot to wear turban).⁹⁶

Initiation became an outward symbol of identity and unity of all Sikhs. Since Gurū Nānak preached the fatherhood of God and the one family of all humankind, Gurū Gobind Singh brought Gurū Nānak's ideal concept of equality to its highest potential by instructing the *pañj pyāre* to drink from the same bowl. The irrelevance of caste distinctions was strengthened due to the

fact that the *pañj pyāre* were from different *zāts* and also from different regions of India, illustrating the unity of the Sikh faith. The *pañj pyāre* were:

- 1 Bhāi Dayā Singh, a *khatrī* from Lahore, Punjab.
- 2 Bhāi Dharam Singh, a *jaṭ* from Rohtas.
- 3 Bhāi Mohkām Singh, a *dhobī* (washerman) from Dwarka, Gujrat.
- 4 Bhāi Sāhib Singh, a *nai* (barber) from Bidar, Karnataka.
- 5 Bhāi Himmat Singh, a *jhīr* (water carrier) from Jagannath Puri, Orissa.⁹⁷

But Gurū Gobind Singh's institution of the *kes* suggests that the ideal *amritdhārī* in Sikhism, is also one who has uncut hair.

The act of initiation in Sikhism is not merely physical for, above all, it is regarded as a spiritual rebirth. Just as the Hindu twice-born, *dvijā*, classes were spiritually reborn at the *upanayana*, sacred thread, ceremony so, too, initiated Sikhs could be regarded as being 'twice-born'. The spiritual aspect of initiation is illustrated by Randhir Singh in his Punjabi work entitled *Amrit-ki-Hai*, translated into English by Trilochan Singh: 'Baptism in Sikhism is not mere ritual. It is a spiritual rebirth. Those who go in for baptism without inner preparations and discipline remain deprived of its spiritual impact in their body and mind'.⁹⁸ Violation of the rules of the *Khālsā* results in the person becoming a *patit* and therefore returning to the inferior non-spiritual state in which he or she was prior to taking initiation into the *Khālsā*.

On becoming initiated the Sikh's next step is to bring oneself nearer to God by *nām simran* (AG 465). But this raises a crucial point. Since it is *nām simran* which brings the individual closer to God, it could be contended that a Sikh should primarily be regarded as one who has total faith in *Satgurū* and the teachings of the ten Gurūs: initiation is only the *means* to this. And the institution of the means by Gurū Gobind Singh arose, essentially, out of a need for a more military character to Sikhism. The militant character of Gurū Gobind's teachings is portrayed in his equating of the sword with God. Harbans Singh draws attention to the autobiography of Gurū Gobind Singh, the *Bachitra Natak*, in which he uses the term 'Sword' to refer to God: 'I bow with love and devotion to the Holy Sword, Assist me that I may be able to complete this work'.⁹⁹ But once that need is removed, is such initiation a prerequisite to true inner spirituality?

Since the teachings of Gurū Gobind Singh remain separate in the *Dasam Granth*, the nature of Sikh doctrine as contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* remains concentrated on the importance of *bhakti* through *nām simran*. Although the teachings of Gurū Tegh Bahādur were added to the original *Ādi Granth*, the compositions of Gurū Gobind Singh remain in a separate volume. And it is in the *Dasam Granth* that the importance of the *Khālsā* is highlighted, not in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Thus, the period of Gurū Gobind Singh's successorship gave rise to the necessity of forming the *Khālsā*; it was certainly this that created a heightened consciousness of identity among the Sikhs, and a

more marked military outlook. This was necessary at the time, but the pure spirituality of Gurū Nānak's teachings underpins this and is the bottom line of Sikh identity.

Issues of Identity and Ultimate Authority Within the Panth

The difficulty in classifying *all* followers of the Sikh faith, the *Panth* as a whole, under one overall definition as stated in the *Rehat Maryādā* (which was produced by the SGPC) has been highlighted above. Thus, a central question pertaining from the Singh Sabhā period through to the present day is, who has authority in defining a Sikh, and indeed, who or what has ultimate authority in Sikhism? And, is this authority accepted by *all* Sikhs?

When discussing the identity of the *Panth* as a whole, the effects of the diaspora upon Sikh identity are significant. Many migrant Sikhs who left the Punjab in order to find employment overseas were faced with the issue of abandoning the outward form of their faith in order to gain better prospects of finding employment abroad. New arrivals from India were influenced by earlier migrants to have their *kes* cut in order to improve their prospects of finding employment.¹⁰⁰ It was because of the Sikh's outward identity that he was a victim of discrimination. Indeed, earlier immigrants were rarely able to take action against prospective employers in defence of their *kes*, turban, or any other issues, primarily because of the lack of ability to communicate efficiently with non-Asians. On the whole, nevertheless, earlier migrants felt a need to conform to western society.

For the earlier migrants maintaining the *Khālsā* form of religion was not a primary issue; they had left the Punjab to make money and had hoped to return to India. In some respects, therefore, the *Khālsā* orientation of the *Rehat Maryādā* has been challenged by Sikhs of the diaspora. Nevertheless, their *spiritual* reverence towards *gurbāṇī* did not necessarily encounter any changes. But this raises a crucial and controversial issue as to whether the Sikhs who had preferred to cut their hair in order to find employment could be regarded as Sikhs or not. It is clear from within the *Panth* itself that most Sikhs in the diaspora would have undeniably stressed their Sikh status as expressed *internally*: that is, they would have continued to follow the teachings of the ten Gurūs in regard to spiritual aspects of the religion, despite abandoning external symbols. It was probably as the consequence of families reuniting once the myth of return had been abandoned, that the newly arrived women orientated their family members towards traditional Sikh values once again. Importantly, spiritual conformity to the principles of the Sikh faith was not compromised. Thus, the question arises, is the standard set by the *Rehat Maryādā* fair to those who remained *spiritually* faithful to Sikh principles and, to Sikhs born in the diaspora who inherited a lessened emphasis on outward symbols?

Today, many diaspora-born Sikhs no longer see the importance of keeping the hair unshorn. These individuals may, nevertheless, be well versed in Sikh philosophy and may be devout followers of the Sikh religion: is it fair to say, then, that they are not Sikhs because of their outward appearance? On the other hand, the majority of Punjabi Sikhs are born into their faith and have not accepted Sikhism through personal choice (unlike, for example, the majority of the *gorā* Sikhs who are discussed in [Chapter Six](#)). Being Sikhs by convention renders it difficult for many young Punjabi Sikhs to establish exactly why they are following the teachings of the ten Gurūs in an internalized sense. Some parents do not keep outward symbols and do not familiarize their children with their faith – and this is a particular problem outside the Punjab – but they still regard themselves as Sikh. So, many diaspora-born Sikhs are told that they are Sikhs without knowing what it *really* entails. Furthermore, being brought up in a country anywhere in the world will inevitably have an impact on the individual: whereas the first migrants to the diaspora saw foreign countries as an opportunity for future prospects only, diaspora-born Sikhs are obviously in a firmer position to regard the prospective countries as their native country. Many older-generation Sikhs express the concern that those Sikhs, especially the younger generation, who do not keep the outward form of the *Khālsā*, will eventually break away completely from Sikhism.

Here I come to the essence of the rather particular and urgent problem: should the definition of a Sikh be less *Khālsā* orientated so that it can take into consideration the influences of western society on the younger generation in particular, or, should it retain its *Khālsā* orientation in order to preserve the essence of what a Sikh really is outwardly and inwardly in the face of possible dilution of Sikh culture and meaning?

Notably, and importantly, not all Sikhs accept the authority of the SGPC, and therefore its definition of a Sikh as constituting the *Khālsā*. The SGPC has supreme authority in *Panthic* matters and in this respect is second only to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.¹⁰¹ A substantial number of Sikhs, however, firmly assert that it is the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* alone that has ultimate authority in the *Panth*, regarding the SGPC as a political institution.¹⁰² Nevertheless, this raises its own problems in terms of the interpretation of *gurbāṇī* which has resulted in factions within the *Panth*; moreover, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* makes no mention of the *Khālsā* which was instituted after the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* had been written. Here, then, one is confronted by the problem of identifying ultimate authority in Sikhism. Furthermore, there are many Sikhs who recognize the authority of particular leaders and *Sants* over that of the SGPC – this has given rise to diversity in the *Panth*, which is particularly highlighted in relation to the five groups which are explored in the following chapters. Thus uniformity of Sikh practice and belief, which the SGPC set out to achieve in its production of the *Sikh Rehat Maryādā* has not been achieved – this is again illustrated in detail in the following

chapters in relation to five groups who are or have had allegiance in the past to the Sikh faith.

At present, no other definition of a Sikh than that contained in the *Rehat Maryādā* is seen as authoritative. But using this alone as a criterion for assessing the *Sikhness* of particular groups is not adequate enough. In the analysis of Sikh groups that have sprung from Sikh influence, and which now follows in the succeeding chapters, I have used broader criteria and discussion, since this allows an assessment of the importance of the *Rehat Maryādā* in issues of Sikh identity. The criteria employed have been the following:

- 1 To analyse how far each group conforms to *Khālsā* ideals laid down in the *Rehat Maryādā*.
- 2 To examine the extent to which a group places supremacy on belief in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the ten Gurūs, and to examine the extent to which other scriptures and, indeed, other gurūs and leaders are attributed importance.
- 3 To assess the extent to which beliefs and practices inform the identity of the group as Sikh,¹⁰³ as more orientated to being defined as Hindu, or as neither Sikh nor Hindu, but having a separate and distinct identity.
- 4 To examine the particular position on *zāt* within each group, and to investigate the extent to which groups have a specific caste following. Retaining caste distinctions is against the teachings of the Gurūs and a rejection of the ideals of *Khālsā* initiation.

I have highlighted thus far that there are many varieties of Sikhs in the *Panth*. By examining the five groups in the following chapters, I have illustrated that each group has made its own contributions to the variety of Sikhs with regard to Sikh identity.

Notes

¹ Oberoi in his 'The Construction of Religious Boundaries' provides a detailed explanation of the importance of the production of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. His work also examines the circumstances that led to the development of the Singh Sabhās, the Chief *Khālsā Dīwān* and the *Tat Khālsā*, resulting in the establishment of the Shromañī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee. These organizations have each contributed to the issue of who a Sikh is, and many of the leaders of these organizations were, indeed, responsible for providing the definition of a *Khālsā* Sikh as stated in the *Rehat Maryādā*.

² Oberoi, H. (1994) *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 50–51.

³ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴ Shackle, C. (1995, 2nd edn 1981) *A Gurū Nānak Glossary*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, p. 47.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Singh Pashaura (1999) 'Early Markers of Sikh Identity: A Focus on the Works of First Five Gurus' in Singh Pashaura and Barrier, N.G. *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*, Manohar: New Delhi, p. 76.

⁷ McLeod, W.H. (1980) *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sākhīs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 260.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁰ *Vār 1, Paurī 21*. Singh, J. (1998) *Vārāṇ Bhāi Gurdās*, vol. 1 and 2, New Delhi: Vision and Venture, p. 51.

¹¹ *Vār 3, Paurī*, ibid., p. 107.

¹² *Vār 4, Paurī 17*, ibid., p. 136.

¹³ *Vār 5, Paurī 8*, ibid., p. 148.

¹⁴ *Vār 6, Paurī 3*, ibid., p. 164.

¹⁵ *Vār 11, Paurī 3*, ibid., p. 273.

¹⁶ *Vār 3, Paurī 1*, ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷ The practice of pouring water over the feet of the Gurū, which is then drunk by the initiate. This form of initiation existed until the formation of the *Khālsā* in 1699.

¹⁸ This is initiation into the *Khālsā* whereby water, with dissolved sugar crystals is drunk by the initiate in the presence of the *pañj pyāre* – five Sikhs who symbolize the original five members of the *Khālsā*.

¹⁹ Cole, W.O. (1973) *A Sikh Family in Britain*, London: Religious Education Press, p. 34.

²⁰ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), p. 132.

²¹ See Singh, Teja (1984 rp of 1922 edn) *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, Amritsar: SGPC, p. 103.

²² Singh, Fauja (1979) *Guru Amar Das: Life and Teachings*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, p. 124. Fauja Singh makes it clear that initiates would drink *amrit* that had been prepared by water poured over the feet of the *mañjī* leader himself. He goes on to remark that the initiation of followers by the *mañjī* leaders 'answered an urgent Sikh need of the time and immensely helped in the spread of Sikhism' (ibid).

²³ These are collections of the hymns of the earlier Gurūs, to which the hymns of the third Gurū were added. See Mann, G.S. (1996) *The Goindval Pothis*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

²⁴ 'The Vedas and semitic texts know not the Lord's mystery' (AG 1021). *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 3351.

²⁵ Singh, Pashaura, 'Early Markers of Sikh Identity', p. 79.

²⁶ This is the present day Golden Temple, a title given to *Harmandir Sāhib* after Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh had the building covered in gold leaf.

²⁷ Prior to its installation as Gurū, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* was referred to as the *Ādi Granth*, literally the 'first compilation' of the works of the first five Sikh Gurūs.

²⁸ See Mann, G.S. (2001) *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 3738.

³⁰ The term *Khālsā* had been derived from the Arabic word '*khalisah*' referring to 'Pure': see *Vaisakhi*, pamphlet published by the Sikh Missionary Society, London, p. 1. Additionally, Gurū Gobind Singh had already abolished the *masand* system instituted by Gurū Rāmdās, due to the *masands* misusing their delegated authority. Since they had the right to bestow *charanamrit*, many of the *masands* had started to set up their own rival sects.

³¹ *Vaisakhi*, pamphlet published by the Sikh Missionary Society, London, p. 8.

³² See Cole, W.O. and Sambhi, P.S. (1995, 2nd fully revised edn, first published 1978), *The Sikhs*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, p. 36.

³³ McLeod, W.H. (1976) *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 18.

³⁴ Views expressed by Professor Grewal at a lecture given during the Sikh and Punjab Studies Conference at Coventry University, May 1999.

³⁵ Lal, B.H. 'Sahajdhari Sikhs: Their Origin and Current Status within the Panth' in *Sikh Identity*, p. 111.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

³⁷ Singh, Gopal (1990 rp of 1979 edn) *A History of the Sikh People*, Delhi: World Book Centre, p. 284.

³⁸ McLeod, W.H. (1992 rp of 1989) *Who is a Sikh?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 7.

³⁹ See McLeod, W.H. (1997) *Sikhism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 63–65, and Grewal, J.S. (2002 reprint of 1994) *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, chapter 5.

⁴⁰ See Grewal, *ibid.*, chapter 6.

⁴¹ McLeod, *Sikhism*, p. 70.

⁴² Much literature has been published on the history and purpose of the Singh Sabhās. See Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, and Barrier, N.G. (1998) 'The Singh Sabhās and the Evolution of Modern Sikhism, 1875–1925' in Baird, R.D. (3rd revised edn) *Religion in Modern India*, Manohar: Delhi, pp. 192–223.

⁴³ Oberoi, *ibid.*, p. 361.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?* p. 86.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Wilson, H.H. (1978 rp of 1862 edn) *Religions of the Hindus*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, p. 121ff.

⁴⁸ See Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ See Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, p. 136.

⁵⁰ Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 141.

⁵¹ Ibid., chapter 3, pp. 139–203.

⁵² Jacquemont cited in Garrett, H.L.O. (1985 rp of 1934 edn) *The Panjab A Hundred Years Ago*, New Delhi: Rima Publishing House, pp. 9–10.

⁵³ Singh, Pashaura 'Early Markers of Sikh Identity', p. 83.

⁵⁴ See Barrier, N.G. (1998) 'The Singh Sabhās and the Evolution of Modern Sikhism, 1875–1925' in Baird, *Religion in Modern India*, p. 196.

⁵⁵ See McLeod, W.H. (1987) *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, p. 11.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶² Ibid., p. 36.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See Singh, Harbans (1994) *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 254.

⁶⁵ Singh, Gopal, *A History of the Sikh People*, p. 610.

⁶⁶ Oberoi, H.S. 'A Historiographical and Bibliographical Reconstruction of the Singh Sabhā in Nineteenth Century Panjab' in *Journal of Sikh Studies*, 10 (1983): 120–21.

⁶⁷ See Shackle, C. 'Sikhism' in Hardy, F. (1990) *The Religions of Asia*, London: Routledge, p. 192.

⁶⁸ Grewal, J.S. (1999) 'Nabha's *Ham Hindu Nahin*: A Declaration of Sikh Ethnicity' in Singh, P. and Barrier, N.G. *Sikh Identity*, p. 232.

⁶⁹ See Jones, K.W. 'Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya-Sikh Relations, 1877–1905' in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 32 (1973): 457.

- ⁷⁰ Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, p. 147.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., p. 462.
- ⁷² Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, p. 222. Mahārājā Duleep Singh was the son of Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh who is also known as the 'Lion of the Punjab'.
- ⁷³ Ibid., p. 214.
- ⁷⁴ See Jones, K.W. 'Ham Hindu Nahin', p. 467.
- ⁷⁵ See Oberoi, 'A Historiographical and Bibliographical Reconstruction of the Singh Sabhā in Nineteenth Century Panjab', p. 126.
- ⁷⁶ See Singh, Mohinder (1978) *The Akali Movement*, Delhi: Macmillan, p. 23.
- ⁷⁷ See Singh, Teja, *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, p. 103.
- ⁷⁸ See Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, p. 5.
- ⁷⁹ Singh, Teja, *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, p. 199.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 113. The author uses sexist language and thus, in his writings, suggests that prospective candidature only applied to males.
- ⁸¹ See Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, p. 35.
- ⁸² The highest worldly authority in Sikhism.
- ⁸³ See Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, p. 47.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 18.
- ⁸⁵ It seems peculiar to draw reference to the 'Sikhness' of a deceased person. However, there must have been an apparent reason. One suggestion is that, since by 1925 the majority of Sikhs were so by convention, it was necessary to determine whose ancestors were Sikhs and whose non-Sikh.
- ⁸⁶ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada*, (1978) Amritsar: SGPC, p. 25.
- ⁸⁷ McLeod, *Sikhism*, p. 305.
- ⁸⁸ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada*, pp. 12–13. Here, again, the use of sexist language appears to be defining male Sikhs, rather than incorporating both males and females.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 28.
- ⁹⁰ Lal, B. H. 'Sahajdhari Sikhs: Their Origin and Current Status within the Panth', p. 110.
- ⁹¹ Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, p. 117.
- ⁹² Bidwell, S. (1987) *The Turban Victory*, London: The Sikh Missionary Society UK, p. 67.
- ⁹³ McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?* p. 113.
- ⁹⁴ See Singh Kirpal, (1985) *The Sikh Symbols*, London: Sikh Missionary Society, UK, p. 12.
- ⁹⁵ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 3570.
- ⁹⁶ *Vār 32, Paurī 19, Vārāṇ Bhāi Gurdās*, translator Jodh Singh, p. 267.
- ⁹⁷ *Vaisakhi*, p. 4.
- ⁹⁸ Singh, Trilochan (1981) *The Meaning of Sikh Baptism*, Ludhiana, Punjab: Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh Trust, p. 16.
- ⁹⁹ Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, p. 81.
- ¹⁰⁰ Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, p. 194.
- ¹⁰¹ McLeod, *Sikhism*, pp. 263–67.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., p. 265.
- ¹⁰³ These are informed by essential beliefs from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and common and traditional practices that would be considered correct behaviour in accordance with the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*.

Chapter 2

Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā

The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā¹ is a group that places noticeable emphasis on a specific *Sant* following, unique to the group. The followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā adhere to the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurūs, as well as the teachings and commands of their spiritual leader, Sant Puran Singh.

Sants in the Sikh Tradition

The term *Sant* has two meanings in the Sikh tradition.² First, it refers to the *Sant* tradition of India, which was divided into the *Vaiṣṇava Sants* and the Northern *Sants*. Gurū Nānak probably belonged to the latter with their insistence on the ineffable, *nirguṇa*, nature of the Absolute; whereas the former recognized depictable forms of the Absolute. The second usage of the term *Sant* refers to a spiritual guide.³ Inevitably, therefore, the wide number of *Sants* found in Sikhism today, a number of whom are unique to a particular group of Sikhs, are deemed to be spiritually enlightened beings.⁴ Such is the case of Sant Puran Singh and his successors among the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. According to followers, he is said to have been a humble person, always recognizing the needs of others, thus Sant Puran Singh is commonly called Sant Bābā Puran Singh Ji. The term *Bābāji* is used synonymously with *Sant* for a spiritually enlightened individual. His followers truly believe him to have possessed supernatural powers. Nevertheless, however, *Sants* are not to be confused with the Sikh Gurūs: the role of a *Sant* is not that of a Gurū. The immense influence, nevertheless, of *Sants* upon the religious lives of their followers is significant. The majority, if not all, *Sants* stress the importance of taking *amrit* among followers. In the majority of cases, Sikh *Sants* are males. Interestingly, *Sants* were praised by the Sikh Gurūs; Gurū Arjan states:

In the saints' congregation the face becomes bright.

In the saints' congregation all the filth is removed. (AG 271)⁵

Sant Puran Singh

Sant Puran Singh was born in India circa 1898 and migrated to Karicho in Kenya circa 1917 in order to seek new opportunities like other Indians who had migrated to Africa around this period. Since Sant Puran Singh belonged to the *rāmgarhīā* caste of Sikhs, he followed his traditional *zāt* occupation as a carpenter, having his own workshop in Karicho, known as the ‘Karicho Wagon Works’, where he made wheels for carriages. Followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā believe that one day Sant Puran Singh had a divine inspiration and was called by God to bring people who had wandered away from religion back into the Sikh faith. Followers of the *Sant* would gather in his workshop in Karicho to learn more about the Sikh religion, the importance of the ten Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Sant Puran Singh stressed the importance of taking initiation, which in turn entailed vegetarianism and complete abstinence from alcohol and tobacco. Vegetarianism in Sikhism remains a disputed area, the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* neither encourages nor discourages its practice. Sant Puran Singh was responsible for the mass initiation of Sikhs and non-Sikhs into Sikhism. Thus, it was in Karicho that the first *Jathā* of Sant Puran Singh was established. The ideal of *bhakti* is a prominent feature of Sant Puran Singh’s teachings. He also preached about selfless service, *nishkāmātā*: individuals should perform *sewā*, service, without hope of a reward and with a complete loss of ego. The founder is, indeed, regarded a *Sant* in the truest sense by his followers.

The majority of Sant Puran Singh’s followers are *rāmgarhīās* who have an East African connection. The majority of Sikhs who initially migrated to East Africa from India were of the *rāmgarhīā zāt*, this was due to the crafting ability of the *rāmgarhīā* sought by the pioneers of the African railways. The ethnic origin of all followers is Punjabi. The ideology of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā lies in the religious revival of the *Panth* in the diaspora by performing mass *amrit* ceremonies in the *Jathā*’s distinct *gurdwārās*.

In 1968 Sant Puran Singh first visited Britain. He brought along with him five Sikhs who had taken *amrit* from him in Kenya: their task was to establish the *Jathā* in Britain. The first *amrit parchār* (initiation ceremony into the *Khālsā*, by taking *amrit*) was carried out by Sant Puran Singh, at the Shepherd’s Bush *Gurdwārā* in 1971, and again in 1972. This was one of the first *gurdwārās* in Britain, it is not a *gurdwārā* exclusively of the *Jathā*. It was not until 1975 that Sant Puran Singh migrated to the UK permanently. His original intention had been to migrate from Kenya to Delhi; however, he was of the opinion that East African migrants in the UK were in more need of religious guidance. On his arrival he stayed with his daughter in Clapham, then in 1976, moved in with his son in Ilford, where he stayed until his death.

The Successors of Sant Puran Singh

Sant Puran Singh's death took place in Ilford, Essex on 5 June 1983. A total of around twelve to fifteen thousand people were reported to have attended his funeral. His ashes were taken to northern Punjab, to a place known as *Bhagor Sāhib*. The successor of Sant Puran Singh was Bhāi Norang Singh who had been chosen by the former to carry on the divine mission. It is believed by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā that the one same spirit and spiritual power obtained by Sant Puran Singh had been passed through to his successors. It is a belief that certainly has overtones of the *joṭ*, divine light, which was passed from Gurū Nānak to succeeding Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. There seems to be evidence here, therefore, that, successorship in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is being compared to the *joṭ* of Gurū Nānak.

There is some suggestion that Sant Puran Singh and his successors are attributed a divine status. In Sikh teachings, all human beings are regarded as divine in a sense, due to the immanent nature of the Supreme God residing in the heart of each individual. However, this divine aspect is regarded as being of a *higher* nature among the Nishkām Sewak Jathā *Sants*. Thus they are regarded as being on a higher spiritual level than their followers. This exaltation is further heightened by the fact that Sant Puran Singh, Bhāi Norang Singh and the present *Bābāji*, are believed to possess supernatural powers, which include the ability to relieve followers from certain ailments. Successors were tested before taking on their role, to assess their abilities to lead the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Sant Puran Singh, while in their presence, was able to detect their devotion and ability of 'guiding' diaspora Sikhs. Faith in God and being a spiritually uplifted individual were the main characteristics looked for in successors (the power of authority from one leader to the next is reflected in the similar selection of the *Dalai Lama*). The successor is not elected, rather he is *selected*; no meetings are held to discuss who will be chosen out of a panel of prospective applicants. During the leader's lifetime, it already becomes apparent to him and to followers as to whom the next leader will be. No initiation rites take place when a new leader takes over the total responsibility of the *Jathā*. This is primarily due to the fact that the spiritual nature and the light of wisdom, *joṭ*, have already been passed on to him by the previous leader. Notably, no 'initiation' rites as such took place either when one Sikh Gurū vested gurūship in the next. To mark the gurūship of the next Gurū, the preceding Gurū would hand over five coins, a coconut and the *pothi* (book of hymns).⁶ Interestingly, the custom of already choosing his successors by Sant Puran Singh differs from the successorship of the Sikh Gurūs; Sant Puran Singh chose the next two successors during his lifetime. Although Gurū Nānak chose Lehnā to become Gurū Angad, it was Gurū Angad who chose Gurū Amardās.

Prior to having met Sant Puran Singh, Norang Singh was living in Malacca, Singapore, where he was a member of the *saṅgat* of a holy man, known by the

name of Sant Bābā Sohan Singh who instructed him to go to England. There, he would meet a *mahāpurakh* whom he was to regard as God himself.⁷ Norang Singh commenced his *sewā* and began the development of the Birmingham *gurdwārā* in 1983. He also acquired permission to restore some damaged architecture at the Golden Temple, Amritsar. Since all *gurdwārās* in the Punjab come under the supreme control of the Shromaṇī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Norang Singh asked for written permission from the SGPC to undertake the project of renovating the Golden Temple, and also to change the *cholā* ‘canopy’ over the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. On 3 February 1995, Bhāi Norang Singh obtained permission from the SGPC. Norang Singh died on 3 July 1995. His ashes were also scattered in the river at *Bhagor Sāhib*, ten days after his cremation at the Birmingham crematorium.

Bhāi Mohinder Singh, who was born in March 1939, took over the role of leadership after Norang Singh’s death. Bhāi Mohinder Singh, as remarked earlier, was originally appointed by Sant Puran Singh himself to become the successor after Norang Singh and, along with Mr Harbans Sagoo,⁸ had taken *amrit* in 1973 from Sant Puran Singh in Africa. Since Sant Puran Singh has not left any indication as to the successor of Bhāi Mohinder Singh, it remains to be seen how his successor will be chosen. Bhāi Mohinder Singh’s *bhaktī* is attested by the group, which recognizes him as an individual of high spiritual standing, a *Sant* indeed. Prior to becoming *bābājī*, Mohinder Singh was employed as a civil engineer by the Zambian Government.

The importance of Mohinder Singh among the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā cannot pass unnoticed. A tremendous amount of respect – at times veneration – is given to him by the *saṅgat*. He is the present leader of the group worldwide. He is consulted in virtually every aspect of social, as well as religious, life. Members will bow down to him, in the same way that one pays respect to a great *sadhū* or *mahātma*, and ask for his blessing. For example, he is consulted for his advice on purchasing property, on taking up a prospective job, his blessing is also sought for sick members of the family: thus he fulfils a number of altruistic roles. His decision is seen as final. Followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā believe that an individual cannot come as far as the *bābājī* has without the capacity for spiritually fulfilling the needs, and answering the questions of, the *saṅgat*. There are good grounds here for asserting that the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is comparing the roles of their *Sants* with the ten Gurūs. And, if this is the case, then the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā suggests deviation from *Khālsā* norms and from fundamental Sikh belief.

Development of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā

The present number of Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā followers worldwide is assessed by the group itself as approximately one million.⁹ Significantly, since most of these followers are East African in origin, they have been termed ‘twice-migrants’,¹⁰ indicating the stages in migration: first from India to Africa, then from Africa to Britain. Like other Indians in the diaspora, the ‘myth of return’ has also disappeared from the psyche of these followers, that is to say they do not see themselves as returning permanently to India. This has resulted in ethnic minorities of the diaspora often reasserting Indian values in their lifestyle. The majority of East African Sikhs tend to be from the *rāmgarhiā zāt* who tend to be more *Khālsā* orientated in their approach to religion than other Sikh *zāts*, especially the *jāts*. Since the *jāts* are the majority group in the *Panth*, the *rāmgarhiās* aim to establish themselves as superior on religious grounds. The fact that Sant Puran Singh initiated the origins of the group in East Africa, has given East African followers a special kind of bonding with him, and with the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Accordingly, the majority of East African Sikh migrants to Britain are on the whole more religiously inclined than other *zāts* coming directly from India; their experiences are, therefore, made use of on their second migration from East Africa to Britain.

This is somewhat astonishing since it would be expected that if twice-migrated, then the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā should be ‘twice-diluted’. A suggested reason for the *Khālsā* orientation of the twice migrants in comparison to direct migrants from India is that the East African *rāmgarhiās* had already experienced living in a foreign country where their values were to be kept separate from the values of African society. Therefore, since the *rāmgarhiās* had already experienced a threat to Sikh values in Africa, their values would now be strengthened due to a longer experience of migration than those groups whose first experience of migration was in coming to Britain. In the case of the latter, they may not have fully realized what the impact of migration to a diaspora country was going to be, therefore they were not as prepared as East African migrants.

The very first centre of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā was at Karicho, Kenya, where Sant Puran Singh lived and where the first *Jathā* had formed. The Birmingham *gurdwārā* in England has become the headquarters of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā since the departure of Sant Puran Singh. Both Norang Singh was, and Mohinder Singh, is, based here. The *gurdwārā* was established in 1978, as a result of the efforts of Norang Singh, whilst working under the authority of Sant Puran Singh. The day-to-day running of the *gurdwārā* is in the hands of the chairman, who is currently Mohinder Singh. The committee consists of the chairman and four trustees. Utmost authority lies with Mohinder Singh, who is consulted on all matters requiring a decision,

and every aspect with which the *gurdwārā* is concerned – again an overt emphasis on the *Sants* of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā.

Although on the surface the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā *gurdwārās* promote Sikhism, the underlying prominence of the *Sants* is an inescapable aura of these *gurdwārās*. The *gurdwārās* keep records of all members so that they can be informed on all issues. This again provides stronger links by involving all members, and encouraging a sense of belonging very specifically to the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Additionally, members must at least be *kesdhārī*, preferably *amritdhārī*. The particular rubric of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā reads as follows:

A non political, non profit making religious charity funded by voluntary donations dedicated to selfless service of humanity and propagation of religious belief and spirituality. All members are unpaid volunteers.¹¹

In addition the *gurdwārās* of the group provide free accommodation and, importantly, they *are* open to all – whether followers of the *Sants* or not. Responsibilities of the *gurdwārā* however, are only given to followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Marriages, which continue to be arranged endogamously, are also carried out in the group's *gurdwārās*. Thus they serve to strengthen the bonds between followers and enable them to gather together socially too.

The Religious Doctrine of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā

The metaphysics of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā are pertinent in order to assess whether it affiliates to a corporate Sikh identity, or whether it is more akin to an individual identity within the general fold of Sikhism.

God and the Individual

A personal relationship with the Divine forms the basis of Sikh philosophy; indeed, it is this personal relationship that enables the devotee to love God and meditate on God's Name. Although the masculine 'His' is often used when speaking of God in Sikh metaphysics, it must be remembered that *Wāhegurū* is *nirguna*, is beyond attributes and gender. Nevertheless, as is common to many faiths, Sikhs often speak in masculine terms about what is essentially an 'It'. The personal approach to God in Sikh teachings is often depicted as the bride's love for her groom; the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā also depicts a devotee, male or female, as the 'bride' of God.¹² Thus, it follows that God is beyond gender in *gurbāṇī* since the whole of humanity is symbolized as the bride. In this respect, adherence to Sikh teachings is, indeed, exemplified by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Just as the husband bestows his love on his wife so, too,

Wāhegurū (the groom) bestows sovereign love upon the honest and true devotees. The aspect of separation experienced by the bride towards her groom is that of *viraha*, a characteristic feature of *Sant* tradition. This indicates the ineffable nature of the Absolute. It is because of the pain of *viraha*, separation, from her beloved, that the bride seeks to unite with him. This is illustrated in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*:

Seeing this play, my mind became happy. My Groom, the Lord, has come to wed me.

Sing, sing, O ladies, the songs of wisdom and reflection.

Into my home, has come my Spouse, the Life of the world. (AG 351)¹³

Gurbāṇī states that the ultimate goal is union with God, and this can only be achieved through the devotee offering total love to God. Total love cannot be obtained if the devotee approaches religion with a questioning attitude. *Bhakti* to God must be offered without an egoistic motive; the individual must offer *bhakti* for the peace of his or her inner self. As mentioned earlier, Sikhism regards each individual as divine, since God's essence is contained in each individual's heart. God is essentially *nirguṇa*, however, God has become *saguṇa* through creation in order that humankind may form a relationship with It. This *saguṇa* aspect holds importance for both the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and Sikh belief generally, since humanity cannot form a loving relationship with a totally transcendent Absolute. Although becoming *saguṇa* through creation, and being immanent within each human heart, God does not take on any form. Thus there are no *avatārs* or *murtis*, images, of God in Sikh thought.¹⁴ Although there are no *avatārs* in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, comments made earlier about devotees seeking the blessing and 'healing powers' of Mohinder Singh are notable. The proper conduct in Sikhism is for a Sikh to concentrate on the teachings of the Gurūs, as contained in *gurbāṇī*, not to seek miracles from holy men. In fact, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā followers adhere more closely to the latter practice.

Bhakti

Bhakti in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, as previously indicated, entails *nishkāmatā* and unconditional love for God: this is a fundamental belief echoed in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. *Nishkāmatā* is the basic philosophy of the group, as its name indicates. Begging and stealing are strongly disapproved of, but the practice of *vand chaknā*, to share with those less fortunate, is emphasized by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. All these are characteristic of the main tenets of Sikhism. The practice of *nām japnā* is seen as vital if one is to hold any hope of achieving *mukti* – this is in line with the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs and their insistence on the benefits of *nām japnā*:

Nanak never forgets the Name and his mind is reconciled to the True One. (AG 419)¹⁵

Gurū Nanak stressed that *nām japnā* in itself is of greater value than pilgrimages and performing worthless rituals (AG 5). In terms of *bhakti* therefore, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā follows *gurbāṇī* in its insistence on *sewā* and *nām japnā*. Nevertheless, the emphasis on seeking the blessings of the *Sants* often takes primacy to the benefits of *nām japnā*. If *nām japnā* brings one closer to God, what does the blessing of a *Sant* confer?

Karma or predestination?

Sikhism teaches that the prerequisite of *mukṭi* is unconditional *bhakti* to *Wāhegurū*, who in return will offer grace, *Nadar*, to the devotee and thus enable the soul's release from *saṃsāra*. Gurū Nānak taught that the most essential entity needed for the liberation of the soul is the *Nadar* of God:

O'Nanak! the Merciful Master, with his kind look, makes them happy. (AG 8)¹⁶

In line with Sikh teachings, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā believes that an individual's efforts will take him or her so far on the path to *mukṭi*, but ultimate release is dependent on the pre-eminent *Nadar* of *Wāhegurū*: even desiring *mukṭi* entails a selfish need. By effort is not meant egoistic action that produces fruitive *karma*, but, rather, an effort to cleanse the soul from ego and desire. Therefore the devotee, rather than desiring *mukṭi*, is to perform *nishkām sewā* – worship without any desire for the fruits. Thus the ideal of *nishkāmāṭā* is given pre-eminence by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, since it involves performing *sewā* without any expectations in return: the group emphasizes that there is no place for egoism in the blissful union with *Wāhegurū*. This idea of egoless service fits in with *gurbāṇī*, which condemns *haumai*, selfishness and ego. Gurū Arjan highlights the binding effects of *haumai*:

I am inebriated with ego, am imbued with other relishes and love evil friends.
My Beloved see-est me wandering in lacs of lanes. (AG 1303)¹⁷

Definition of a Sikh

The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā states that a *true* Sikh is an *amritdhārī*: the *Khālsā* identity of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is clearly accentuated here. Thus, and importantly, in terms of *Khālsā* observation, members of this group are, indeed, observers of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā defines a *gurmukh* as an individual who behaves and lives according to the message and advice given in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. This is reminiscent of *gurbāṇī*, which reiterates that the *gurmukh* is one whose life is totally orientated towards God and the teachings of the

Gurūs as contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*: it is the *gurmukh* who will attain bliss with the Absolute:

The Guru-ward is emancipated, and falls not into entanglements. He ponders over the Divine word, and is delivered through God's Name. (AG 152)¹⁸

The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā does not regard *monās* (those who cut their hair) as being Sikh. However, it does hold a sympathetic view towards them and anticipates that they will become *amritdhārī*, and therefore *true* Sikhs. Here, again, the group adheres to the *Rehat Maryādā* with its aspirations towards *sahajdhārīs*. The fact that the majority of followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā are *amritdhārī* is an indication *per se* of the efforts towards *Khālsā* ideals by the group. Therefore, when *Khālsā* identity is considered, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā followers are ultra-stringent. The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā considers itself to be *more* Sikh than the general *Panth* in its adherence to the Five Ks. But in attempting to be thoroughly *Khālsā* orientated, ironically, they are regarded as separate and different – a characteristic that they themselves court, as much as it is placed on them from many of those outside their fold.

Spiritual leaders

Akin to the majority *Panth*, members of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā attach great respect to the ten Sikh Gurūs, and to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. It has been emphatically claimed by many followers that, apart from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, they do not regard any other as belonging to the line of Gurūs. Belief in all the teachings of the Gurūs as portrayed in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is essential for all followers. In accordance with Sikh belief, Sant Puran Singh is to be seen as a spiritually enlightened being, but is not to be regarded as a successor to the Sikh Gurūs in any way. Therefore, their Sikh identity appears solid. Respect to the same level as that attributed to great *sadhūs* and *mahātmas* of the Indian tradition is permissible, nevertheless, to Sant Puran Singh and his successors. Although Sant Puran Singh and his successors are shown a tremendous amount of respect and prestige, they are not to be confused with the Gurūs: rather, they are given the title of *Sant* or *bābājī*, indicating a respected person. Practically, however, although the term Gurū itself is not applied to the leaders, I am tempted to suggest that sufficient emphasis on the leaders is evident to suggest a difference from general Sikh teachings.

This is certainly evident in practice. During my visits to the centres, especially the Birmingham *gurdwārā*, I observed that there is a room in which pictures exclusively of Sant Puran Singh and Bhāi Norang Singh are given great significance. The followers bow down to the photographic representations of the leaders, though it must be admitted that this could be dismissed by the followers as mere respect for a holy person, and not suggesting that the leaders

are regarded as being Gurūs. Yet such is the power of the present leader that, as remarked earlier, followers would come to him with problems relating to illnesses or social matters. And the fact that they truly believed such problems could be solved with the intervention of the *bābājī* suggests a level of supremacy that at times inhibits the attempts at Sikh conformity of the group. Significantly, however, there are no photographs of Sant Puran Singh or his successors in the prayer halls of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā *gurdwārās*.

Miracles

Miracles associated with Sant Puran Singh and his successors are received and interpreted in different ways by the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Although the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is discouraged from any hagiography concerning Sant Puran Singh and his successors, accounts exist proclaiming that illnesses such as cancer in devout followers have been cured by Puran Singh. I was told, however, that the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is forbidden to make mention of miracles. Prominence is given to Sant Puran Singh's emphasis on *bāṇī* for curing illnesses, rather than on miracles themselves: miracles do not produce pure faith, only a mere 'miracle-based' faith. Followers regard the very fact that large numbers of Sikhs have taken *amrit* and adhere to *gurbāṇī* to be a miracle of the revival of Sikhism in the diaspora. Yet a miracle expressing some degree of divinity, with regard to Sant Puran Singh, was recounted by one of his close followers:

In 1976 during a *sampaṭ akhaṇḍ pāth* [lasting eleven days in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā] in Southall [London], Sant Puran Singh had delivered a message which had been given to him during a vision six weeks earlier. At this occasion a *gorā* [western male] and *gorī* [western female] had attended. After the service Sant Puran Singh asked the female what she had seen. In reply she answered "I saw whatever you showed". The woman was reported to have told Sant Puran Singh that she looked up at the sky and saw the *devatas* dressed in white clothes, hands held together asking Sant Puran Singh what orders he had for them. At this, Sant Puran Singh told the woman to remain quiet and speak no further.

Furthermore, many followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā believe that on this day a bright light illuminated the Southall area of London, suggesting something very special had taken place. The result of the alleged event was that a large number of individuals had taken *amrit*.

Central Praxis

The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā emphasizes the fact that their practices do not, in essence, attempt to differentiate them from the rest of the *Panth*. They aim to do things *properly* rather than differently. Ironically, it is this attitude that is responsible for the *distinction* between the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and the general *Panth*. This emphasis on ‘properness’ appears to be fragmenting Sikh identity rather than cementing it as a result of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā having developed many unique features.

The origin of the distinct practices is believed to have emanated from Sant Puran Singh. The *gurdwārās* of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, worldwide, have the same constitution. The constitution states that the commencement of *akhaṇḍ pāths* and *bhogs* should take place at 5am, and the same pattern is followed in each centre. Slight differences may sometimes occur as to what time members are expected to rise in the morning; this depends on individual circumstances, such as age and health.

Form of Worship

The practice of *akhaṇḍ pāths*, continuous 48-hour readings of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, is very important for the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, as it is for the *Panth* as a whole. However, the form of *akhaṇḍ pāths* carried out by the group differs from those practised by the *Panth* in general. Throughout the service, there will be three *amritdhārī* males present: the *pathī* (reader) for the *akhaṇḍ pāth*, the reader of the *Japjī Sāhib*, and the *giānī* (an individual who is learned in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*) who will distribute the *kaṛāh prasād*, this is the sweetmeal distributed during the service to symbolize equality between all those present at the *gurdwārā*; it is a characteristic feature of all *gurdwārās*. All will wear white clothes, those who eat meat are not permitted to participate. Noticeably, there is no marked emphasis on the white colour in general Sikhism. In return for the service, whether performed at the *gurdwārā* or in the home of a follower, the *pathī* will accept no money, clothes or other gifts, he will also provide and pay for his own transport. The practice of performing five *akhaṇḍ pāths* continuously on marked occasions, such as *gurpurbs* and anniversaries, is also a distinctive feature of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, which is nowhere supported by the *Rehat Maryādā*.

The main purpose of the institution of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* was to end diversity in the *Panth*, whereby all Sikhs would have uniformity in praxis. I contend that the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is responsible for *accentuating* diversity *within* the *Panth*. This suggests that being a follower of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and being a member of the overall *Panth*, are not always coterminous, a factor entrenched somewhat by the additional point that the Sikh *Panth* does not accept Sant Puran Singh and his successors

in the same sense as followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Other Sikhs tend to regard practices, such as five *akhaṇḍ pāths*, as being totally irrelevant and somewhat ostentatious, criticizing the group as attempting to create an ethos of being the most *Khālsā* orientated within the Sikh *Panth*. *Khālsā* ultra-stringency might mean a rigid Sikh identity, but it is not admired. Significantly, a Sikh identity does not necessarily equate with practices of the kind aimed at by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Hence, in this respect, I reiterate that the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā has sought for itself some distinction from the *Panth* generally, and is thus accentuating diversity.

The Position of Women

Women in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā *gurdwāras* are allowed to conduct services, if they wish to do so. However, women in the *gurdwārā* commented that they would rather do certain traditional jobs assigned to them, such as preparing food for the *laṅgar* and attending to the decorative side of the *gurdwārā*. This, they feel, is where they are most needed and where men would not be able to cope: therefore, conducting the services is left to male members of the *gurdwārā* and the issue of female *giānīs* has never really arisen. Noticeably, the majority of *giānīs* in the general *Panth* are also male, in this respect therefore, there is no marked difference between the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and the overall *Panth*.

Interestingly, women involved with the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā cannot take part in the service during an *akhaṇḍ pāth*. It is nowhere stated in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* or, indeed, in *gurbāṇī*, that certain religious practices are prohibited to females. Gurū Nānak himself openly criticized Hinduism for discriminating against women when it came to religious performance, and for refusing to allow women to read Hindu scriptures. He encouraged females to read the scriptures:

From a woman, a woman is born. Without a woman, there can be none.

Nanak, only the one True Lord, is without a woman.

The mouth which ever praises the Lord, is fortunate, rosy and beautiful.

Nanak, those faces shall be bright in the court of that True Lord. (AG 473)¹⁹

In this respect, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā appears to be exhibiting signs of sexual discrimination in religious practice – something that *gurbāṇī* strongly disapproves of. On inquiring why the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā refused female participation in *akhaṇḍ pāths*, the question was evaded by male informants. They remarked that women have other duties such as preparation of the *laṅgar* and cleaning of the *gurdwārā*, which do not leave time for participating in the *akhaṇḍ pāth*; this I did not find to be a satisfactory answer! Nevertheless, another follower explicitly remarked that women are not allowed to read from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, or perform any *sewā* to the Holy

Book. The reasons for female exclusion from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib sewā* on these occasions is not clear, except that the order was given by Sant Puran Singh that only *amritdhārī males* could take part in the actual performance of an *akhaṇḍ pāth*. Additionally, the *kaṛāh prasād* for the *akhaṇḍ pāth* is only to be prepared by the male *amritdhārī giānī* – despite its fundamental principle being associated with equality of both caste and gender. The *kaṛāh prasād* during an *akhaṇḍ pāth* in *gurdwārās* generally can be prepared by an *amritdhārī* male or female and is not restricted to *amritdhārī* males only. The *Rehat Maryādā* confirms this as the norm:

Anyone who has prepared it [*kaṛāh prasād*] in the prescribed manner, can bring it to a Gurdwara for distribution.²⁰

Nevertheless, from personal experience as a Sikh woman, ritual pollution attached to menstruating females is an aspect of Hinduism that Sikhs, on the whole, have not totally rejected. Importantly, there is no statement as such in Sikhism, unlike the Hindu Laws of Manu with regard to menstruating women. I cannot determine whether the concept among Sikhs is widespread, but it *does* exist. A few examples include menstruating women not taking part in cooking *laṅgar* and not preparing *kaṛāh prāsād*. The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā has gone a step further, however, in a total refusal of women, whether menstruating or not, from preparing *kaṛāh prāsād*.

Thus the attitude of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā towards women clearly obscures their adherence to *gurbāṇī* where the social and religious uplifting of women is repeatedly present. In this respect, therefore, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is not egalitarian; it denies full equal rights to females (and from a feminist principle might be said to exclude them). Moreover, since its majority membership is from the *rāmgarhīā zāt* a certain distinctiveness of character is clear. Nevertheless, the position of women in the *Panth*, as a whole, is a perplexing and ambivalent one. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh writes:

As far back as I can remember, the characterization of girls and women in my society was a source of constant ambivalence and thus always fascinated me. The Sikh household into which I was born was part of a Punjabi society that brought together diverse traditions in which the status of women was as dubious as it was critical. I saw them exalted, and I saw them downgraded.²¹

The education of girls is, nevertheless, greatly encouraged by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. The group claims that the majority of young women belonging to the group are graduates. Thus, while women are more curtailed in some areas of religious practice, they are encouraged in education.

Importance of amrit Initiation

Being *amritdhārī* is the ideal aimed at by both the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and the *Rehat Maryādā*: therefore, in this matter the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is firmly in line with *Khālsā* Sikhism. An inner transformation of mind and heart are essential qualities of an *amritdhārī*. The group's adherence to *Khālsā* practices is exemplified by its emphasis on the *Khālsā* form, which is seen as the disciplined way of life as dictated by the code of conduct. It is important that both husband and wife are *amritdhārī*, for the uninitiated partner is regarded as polluting to the *amritdhārī* partner. This, however, is clearly differentiating between *amritdhārī* Sikhs and all others. The reading of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is reserved only for *amritdhārīs* in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā *gurdwārās*. In general *gurdwārās* whether or not the *granthī* must be *amritdhārī* cannot be determined with total certainty. The more *Khālsā* orientated *gurdwārās* insist that the *granthī* is *amritdhārī*, whilst the less *Khālsā* orientated require that he or she be at least *kesdhārī*. In the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā the non-initiated can only contribute to the *sewā* of the *gurdwārā* by cleaning, cooking and serving the *saṅgat*.

It is to be noted that the *Rehat Maryādā* does not require *amritdhārīs* to be vegetarians; *amritdhārī* Sikhs are not prohibited from eating meat,²² as long as it is not *halāl*. The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, however, *insists* on members – the majority of whom are *amritdhārīs* – being pure vegetarians, a practice that, I believe, has no authority in the teachings of the Gurūs, or in the *Rehat Maryādā*. Nevertheless, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā does not stand alone in expecting *amritdhārīs* to be vegetarians, many *gurdwārās* other than those of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā also insist that the initiated must abstain from meat-eating. The issue of vegetarianism in Sikhism continues to be a matter over which there are differing opinions among Sikhs themselves.

Importantly, since the *gurdwārā* is open to people of all faiths and backgrounds, the *laṅgar* is always vegetarian. Therefore, the food prepared in the *laṅgar* is universally acceptable. With regard to the individual's personal choice, although vegetarianism is not a requirement of Sikhism, many Sikhs in actual fact retain Hindu notions of meat-eating as polluting. In this respect, therefore, a large number of *amritdhārīs* prefer not to eat meat. From personal experience, a significant number of Sikhs, although not vegetarian, will abstain from meat-eating on one particular day of the week. To regard some days as holier than others is not in line with the *Rehat Maryādā*. Since the *gurdwārā* is strictly vegetarian, members of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā extend the principle of not eating meat into their everyday lives. In their opinion, abstaining from meat-eating involves the concept of ritual purity, since the handling of meat is also regarded as a source of ritual pollution.

The Ideal of nishkāmatā in Practice

Gurdwārās of the general *Panth* make charges for individuals who use their services, such as the undertaking of the *akhaṇḍ pāth* by *giānīs*, and a member of the *gurdwārā* conducting the wedding ceremony. The Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā, as mentioned earlier, does not charge for services, thus highlighting its adherence to *sewā* more so than the general *Panth*. It is entirely up to individuals if they wish to pay for events such as marriages, death ceremonies, naming ceremonies, or an *akhaṇḍ pāth* and, if so, the amount payable is to be decided by the individual and not by the *gurdwārā*. Thus the group requires nothing in return for services performed. In addition, all the centres of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā around the world have facilities for followers and visitors to stay at the *gurdwārās*' purpose-built accommodation. The accommodation is free and everyone is welcome to stay as long as is required for peace of mind. In this respect the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā is truly carrying forward the message of *gurbāṇī* to perform deeds unselfishly.

The Celebration of baisākhī

In line with Sikh practice in general, *baisākhī*²³ is celebrated with great enthusiasm by the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā, who refer to it as *baisākhī gurburb*. Highly notable is the vast number of *kesdhārīs* present – an indication of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā followers' adherence to the very institutions created on *baisākhī* in 1699. The service begins ten days earlier, with the first of five *akhaṇḍ pāths* commencing at 5am, the final *bhog* taking place at 5am on the day of *baisākhī*. The practice of five continuous *akhaṇḍ pāths*, is one that belongs exclusively to the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā. On the actual day of *baisākhī*, the custom of changing the *nīsān sāhib* is observed, as it is by all Sikhs.

Of major significance in the events taking place on *baisākhī* is the large number of followers taking *amrit*, both in general *gurdwārās* and *gurdwārās* of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā. Since the purpose of the group is for its followers to become *amritdhārī*, the day of *baisākhī* is one on which mass initiations are conducted. All those who wish to take *amrit* are asked to record their names. This is in order for the group to keep the initiated posted on all issues, and to give them a sense of belonging to the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā. Continuous contact with followers prevents them from drifting away. There are age restrictions for those undertaking *amrit*. Regarding the actual act of taking *amrit*, the ceremony at Birmingham (where the present leader resides) begins with Mohinder Singh washing the feet of the *pañj pyāre*. The significance of this action is to highlight the *bābāṇī*'s humility. This act is a prestigious event, since it shows that an action such as washing the feet of others is not regarded



2.1 Mohinder Singh, leader of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, washing the feet of the *pañj pyāre*

as being low. The photograph in [Figure 2.1](#) illustrates Mohinder Singh washing the feet of the *pañj pyāre*, (he is identified by the X on the photograph).

The very fact that mass initiations take place on *baisākhī* in the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā is a clear indicator of the level of adherence to the *Khālsā* by the group. In this matter, their *Khālsā* orientation and conformity cannot be questioned, this, needless to repeat, is the ideal sought by the *Rehat Maryādā*.

Gurpurbs

In line with Sikhism as a whole, the *gurpurbs* of the Sikh Gurūs are celebrated enthusiastically by the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Significant services are held on *baisākhī*, the martyrdom of Gurū Arjan, the *gurgaddi* of the *Ādi Granth* (this is to mark the occasion of Gurū Gobind Singh proclaiming the *Ādi*

Granth as the eternal Gurū of the Sikhs), Gurū Nānak's birthday, the martyrdom of Gurū Tegh Bahādur and Gurū Gobind Singh's birthday. These are central to Sikh practice generally. The festivals of *holā mohallā* and *diwālī* are also celebrated.

Although the birthdays of Sant Puran Singh or his successors are not celebrated, emphasis is placed on celebrations that commemorate the deaths of Sant Puran Singh and Bhāi Norang Singh. Interestingly, the term *gurpurb* is not applied to the anniversaries of the deaths of the two leaders, since they are not regarded as Gurūs, but *Sants*. In Sikhism generally the term *gurpurb* is only applied to anniversaries of the ten Gurūs and the *gurgaddī* of the *Ādi Granth*. The anniversary of the death of Sant Puran Singh is celebrated through five *akhaṇḍ pāths*. One *akhaṇḍ pāth* is held throughout the *gurdwārās* on the anniversary of the death of Norang Singh. The group is eager to point out that the anniversaries of the deaths of its leaders do not take precedence over the *gurpurbs*; the main aim is allegiance to *gurbāṇī*. On this matter, the *Rehat Maryādā* states that:

No ceremony, other than a Sikh Ceremony, is to be performed in a Gurdwara²⁴

The distinctiveness of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā in celebrating the anniversaries of the deaths of Sant Puran Singh and Bhāi Norang Singh, and the emphasis and reverence they attach to the *Sants*, are areas of deviance from the *Rehat Maryādā*. Furthermore, the fact that the two deceased leaders belong exclusively to the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā and not to the overall *Panth*, again promotes what must be claimed as the distinctive nature of the group. Although the group illustrates its *Khālsā* orientation, it is, rather, what it *adds* to such practices that serve to separate and differentiate it within the *Panth*.

The Position of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā Within the Panth

With regard to the *Rehat Maryādā*'s insistence on the outward form of the *Khālsā*, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā occupies an important position *within* the *Panth*: as its overall majority of *amritdhārīs* illustrates. The Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā boasts one of the largest majorities of diaspora-born *amritdhārīs*. This is due to the efforts of Sant Puran Singh and his successors, whose aim was, and continues to be, the religious reorientation of diaspora Sikhs by the correct performance of the Sikh religion, often leading to a position of *Khālsā* ultra-stringency. The emphasis is on the teachings of the ten Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is the sole scripture used. Nevertheless, the insistence on the *Sants* of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā places doubt on their position within the *Khālsā*, and is too prominent a feature to be overlooked. My claim here is that, if leaders other than the ten Sikh Gurūs and

the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are followed, then this is deviance from Sikh belief and identity in a fundamental issue.

Furthermore, the group has a mainly *rāmgarhīā* following. In theory the group claims to accept followers from any *zāt* without any discrimination whatsoever. I was told that if I, as a *jaṭ*, wanted to become a member of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, there would be no obstacles, providing I was ready to take *amrit* and become a vegetarian. In practice, however, it cannot be ignored that the overwhelming majority of followers of the group are *rāmgarhīā*. This may be due to the fact that, since the leaders themselves are *rāmgarhīā*, followers also tend to be so: thus offspring who claim allegiance to the group will obviously be *rāmgarhīā* too.

An important consideration is why the *saṅgat* seek the blessing of Mohinder Singh. Why does he not, instead, stress that followers should find comfort in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*? Surely, it is the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* that is the guide for the *Panth* and not Mohinder Singh? This is another area, therefore, that might suggest the difference and separation of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā from the general *Panth*. Few, if any, outside the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā would seek the advice of Mohinder Singh. Also, the fact that Sant Puran Singh's teachings are of such importance amongst his followers, demonstrates a drifting from the *Khālsā* if the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* is taken as a yardstick. The *Rehat Maryādā* alludes to the fact that an *amritdhārī* Sikh should not follow the teachings of any other than the ten Sikh Gurūs.²⁵

However, the importance of Sant Puran Singh among the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā can be justified if one bears in mind that the tradition of *Sants* and their following has a long history in the Sikh faith. The importance of keeping the company of *Sants* is made mention of in the writings of the Sikh Gurūs: Gurū Arjan himself advocated one's association with *Sants* via the *saṅgat*, attributing *Sants* with 'superhuman ideals':

On the theological plane, a sant is an exalted and venerable figure in the Sikh scriptures. He is to be applauded by ordinary Sikhs. The virtuous life associated with a sant or a *brahmgyani* (one who has a perfect knowledge of God) is strenuously defined in Sikh scriptures. A sant is almost a super-human ideal. Guru Arjan, the fifth guru, devotes several passages in his famous composition *sukhmani* to praise the virtues of a saintly person calling him by various new names *sadh*, sant or *brahmgyani*; making him almost a pale reflection of the God.²⁶

The *Panth* today has various *Sants* who visit the diaspora and are greeted by particular *saṅgats*. This prominence of visiting *Sants* in the lives of diaspora Sikhs, has been highlighted by Tatla: 'the role of visiting *Sants* is of crucial importance, ... *Sants* have shaped the lives of many of their Sikh disciples directly, inspiring others to uphold the religious ideals, and have contributed in several ways to the community's causes and institutions'.²⁷

In the light of this information, the prominence of the *Sants* in the group is not so exceptional. Subsequently, the acceptance of such religious leaders does *not* place the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā beyond conformity to the *Panth*. After all, the primary role and aim of Sant Puran Singh was to bring back the drifted members of diaspora Sikhs, who, through taking *amrit*, would be able to take pride in their *Khālsā* Sikh identity. However, the *supremacy* of Sant Puran Singh and his successors, among followers, enigmatizes their claim to belong to the strict *Khālsā Panth*. Importantly, although the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā claims to be thoroughly Sikh, at times the group differentiates *itself* from the general *saṅgat*.

So, although Sant Puran Singh's aspirations appear analogous to those of the *Panth* as a whole, it is his level of supremacy *per se* that threatens the *Khālsā* conformity of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā. Belief in Sant Puran Singh's divine calling has led to his *exalted* respect and veneration. The idea that Sant Puran Singh was appointed by God to carry out his divine mission appears to be very similar to that of Gurū Nānak's experience. In this respect, I believe that the group is giving Sant Puran Singh an extremely superior position by comparing his calling and task to that of Gurū Nānak's. The comparison between Sant Puran Singh and Gurū Nānak is further highlighted by the fact that followers believe the birth of the former, like that of Gurū Nānak, was non-karmic. That is, Sant Puran Singh had already become one with God and had reincarnated in order to help others on the path to *mukti*.

The very fact that Sant Puran Singh initially wanted to set himself as leader of *gurdwārās* is a concise indication of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā's separateness from the *Panth* generally. Indeed, if the teachings and practices of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā were those of the general *Panth* then there would be no need for distinct places of worship. If respect to the ten Gurūs and their *gurbāṇī* is the message of Sikhism, then why did followers not attend ordinary *gurdwārās*? Why this overt necessity to establish unique *saṅgats*? It is difficult to accept that Sant Puran Singh was promulgating a corporate Sikh identity while emphasizing *his* message and *his* *saṅgat*. These accentuate separation and highlight problems of attempts to establish a uniform Sikh identity. Nevertheless, the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā's overt emphasis on the *Khālsā* form is a major reason for its retention *within* the *Panth*. Levels of reverence towards the *Sants* unique to the group however, differentiate it from other Sikhs. The particular *Sants* are revered by the group alone in their *separate* *gurdwārās*.

Significantly, not all *rāmgarhīās* support the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, many who are not followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, view the group as not being true Sikhs due to their insistence on their 'own' *Sants*. This is interesting, and suggests that not only are there characteristics *within* the group that differentiate it from Sikhism in general, but that Sikhs

outside the group, even of the same *zāt*, regard this group as being different from the overall *Panth*.

The claim of the followers of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā to be true Sikhs has created a rather diverse identity added to a caste-exclusive attitude among them. A single definition of a Sikh is, therefore, inadequate when considering groups such as the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā, who are for the most part thoroughly *Khālsā* orientated, and yet can be differentiated in their practices. Diversity within the *Panth* is further accentuated by the Nāmdhāris who are examined in the following chapter.

Notes

¹ The title *Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā* is translated as follows: *Gurū Nānak* – refers to the founder of the Sikh religion, and therefore indicates his supreme position within the group; *Nishkām* – means ‘selflessness’; *Sewak* – is one who serves God; *Jathā* – a group of people.

² Barrow, J. ‘Religious Authority and Influence in the Diaspora: Sant Jaswant Singh and Sikhs in West London’, in Singh, P. and Barrier, N.G. (1999) *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*, Delhi: Manohar, p. 335.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a detailed examination of the role of *Sants* in the Sikh tradition throughout its development see Schomer, K. and McLeod, W.H. (1987) *The Sants*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 229–79.

⁵ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), p. 901.

⁶ See Cole, W.O. and Sambhi, P.S. (1998 2nd fully revised edn, first published 1978) *The Sikhs*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, pp. 16–18.

⁷ Information from a follower of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā.

⁸ Mr Sagoo is in charge of the Leeds *gurdwārā* of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā in England.

⁹ Since no statistics were shown to me, I am unable to verify the figure.

¹⁰ See Bhachu, P. ‘The East African Sikh Diaspora’ in Barrier, N.G. and Dusenberry, V.A. (1989) *The Sikh Diaspora*, Delhi: Chankaya Publications, pp. 235–60.

¹¹ As stated in the Constitution of the Gurū Nānak Nishkām Sewak Jathā.

¹² With regard to the gender of God, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has suggested that the symbol of *Ik-Onkār* highlights the fact that God in Sikh thought, is beyond gender. She writes: ‘*Ik On Kar* (One Being Is) is the core representation of the Sikh faith: the numeral 1 (Ikk or One) celebrates the existence of That which is beyond gender, space, time, and causality, and refers directly to the Ultimate Reality, to Being Itself. Yet this One is sensuously addressed and cherished in the Sikh holy writ as mother and father, sister and brother – thus as both male and female’ (Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur [1993] *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3). Furthermore, Singh points out that Gurū Gobind Singh emphasized the goddess Dūrgā in his compositions (ibid., p. 121). However, she goes on to highlight that Dūrgā is never worshiped by Gurū Gobind Singh, Dūrgā is used as an inspiration for the Sikh community only (see ibid., pp. 125–6). Thus, the Gurūs do not acknowledge the Hindu goddess’ capability of liberating the *bhaktā*, the only one who is capable of this is *Wāhegurū*.

¹³ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 1171.

¹⁴ I must emphasize that there is no scope for monism in Sikh thought, so that rather than using the analogy of the drop absorbing into the ocean, as in monistic teachings, the analogy of the fish is

utilized in Sikhism. Although the fish needs water to survive, it never becomes absorbed in the water, the fish always retains its difference from the water. In this sense the fish and the water form a unity, but in a dualistic sense. In the same way, an individual will not gain *mukti* without realizing one's inseparability yet difference from God.

¹⁵ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 1390.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4302.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1562–63.

²⁰ *Rehat Maryada* (1978) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 11.

²¹ Singh, *The Feminine Principle*, p. 1.

²² Although there is no prohibition on the eating of beef, Sikhs generally will not eat it out of respect for the cow – a tradition that has been carried on from their Hindu background.

²³ *Baisākhī* commemorates the day in 1699 CE on which the outward form of Sikhism, the *Khālsā*, was created by Gurū Gobind Singh. It takes place on 14 April every year. Prior to the tricentenary of the *Khālsā* in the year 1999, *baisākhī* was celebrated on 13 April.

²⁴ Amritsar, *Rehat Maryada*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁶ Tatla, D.S. 'Nurturing the Faithful: The Role of the Sant among Britain's Sikhs', in *Religion*, 22 (1992): 351.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

Chapter 3

Nāmdhāris

The term Nāmdhāri is translated as ‘one who has the Name of God imbued in the heart’, and it refers to a Punjabi community that stresses meditation on the Name of God, *nām japnā*: a practice that was at the core of the original Nānak community, and one that remains essential to Sikhism today. Another term often used interchangeably for the Nāmdhāris is Kūkās.¹ This term is derived from the Punjabi word ‘to shriek’ (*kūknā*), and refers to the ecstatic singing taking place during Nāmdhāri communal worship. Occasionally, the Nāmdhāri community is also referred to as the *Sant Khālsā*, *Sants* referring to ‘saints’.

A major distinction between the Nāmdhāris and the general *Panth*, is that the former continue the tradition of living Gurūs. Consequently, they deny status of gurūship to the *Ādi Granth*. It is here that the issue of Sikh identity becomes rather intricate. An important paradigm of distinctiveness *per se* is the fact that Nāmdhāris will refer to themselves as ‘Nāmdhāri Sikhs’. This at once suggests secession as far as they, themselves, are concerned, from other Sikhs.

A particular feature of this group is that it is not a caste-based organization. Although its membership consists of a substantial majority of members from the *rāmgarhīā zāt*, there are also followers from the *jaṭ* and *arorā² zāts*. I was informed that a small percentage of members from the Scheduled Classes also make up its total numbers.³ Interestingly, inter-caste marriages take place, a practice unique to Nāmdhāris.

Nāmdhāris adamantly believe that the line of human Gurūs did not end with Gurū Gobind Singh’s installing the *Ādi Granth* as eternal Gurū. This labels the Nāmdhāris as heretics by many Sikhs. Whereas the Gurū Nānak Nishkān Sewak Jathā, as seen in [Chapter Two](#), attributes the term *Sant* to religious leaders of the group, the Nāmdhāris explicitly equate their leaders as successors of the ten human Sikh Gurūs. Despite this, there are numerous ways in which this particular group is thoroughly *Khālsā* adhering. It is for this reason that the Nāmdhāris are considered as belonging *within* the overall *Panth*. Significantly, McLeod has pointed out that: ‘Faced by their devotion, the Tat Khalsa in general and Principal Teja Singh⁴ in particular concluded that even if they [Nāmdhāris] were astray on one vital point they were at least potentially aligned with the *Panth*’.⁵

History of the Nāmdhāri Tradition

Nāmdhāri justification for the succession of human Gurūs, after the death of Gurū Gobind Singh is extremely important to assess the Sikh alliance of the group. According to the Nāmdhāris, Gurū Gobind Singh did not die at Nander in 1708, as understood by Sikhs in general. Instead, he lived his later life as Ajapāl Singh until the year 1812. Nāmdhāris believe that Gurū Gobind Singh, assuming the role of an actor, merely disappeared from the scene of his alleged death at Nander. It is an account detailed by Macauliffe:

While all were mourning the loss of the Guru a hermit arrived and said, “You suppose that the Guru is dead. I saw him this very morning riding his bay horse. When I bowed to him he said, “Come, O hermit, let me behold thee. Very happy am I that I have met thee at the last moment.” I then asked him whither he was wending his way. He smiled and said he was going to the forest on a hunting excursion. He had his bow in his hand, and his arrows were fastened with a strap to his waist. The Sikhs who heard this statement arrived at the conclusion that it was all the Guru’s play, that he dwelt in uninterrupted bliss, and that he showed himself wherever he was remembered. . . . Wherefore for such a Guru who had departed bodily to heaven, there ought to be no mourning. The ashes of the bier were collected and a platform built over them’.⁶

Macauliffe’s account is interpreted differently by Nāmdhāris and non-Nāmdhāris. According to the Nāmdhāris, the account itself justifies, literally, the fact that Gurū Gobind Singh did not die, but acted out a mere disappearing scene. On the other hand, non-Nāmdhāri Sikhs interpret the account as alluding to the *physical* death of the tenth Gurū, though his *spiritual* presence, nonetheless, was always retained within the *Panth*. This latter opinion is again strengthened by Macauliffe when he goes on to state that the physical death of the Gurū took place on the day in question in 1708,⁷ supporting the Gurū’s spiritual presence among the *Panth*, as opposed to an actual physical bodily existence as postulated by the Nāmdhāris.⁸ From this period onwards emerges the distinction in belief between the Nāmdhāris and the general *Panth*, and it is also from this period that Nāmdhāris believe Gurū Gobind Singh changed his name to Ajapāl Singh.

Kūkās therefore believe that gurūship was *not* eternally vested in the *Ādi Granth* but, rather, Gurū Gobind Singh, before his death in 1812, chose an *arorā* by the name of Bālak Singh, from the village of Hazro, as his successor. The birth date of Gurū Bālak Singh is uncertain, according to some authors it is cited as 1797⁹ whereas others suggest a date of 1799.¹⁰ Overall, however, the date accepted by the majority of Nāmdhāris is 1785.¹¹ There is unanimity over the date of Gurū Bālak Singh’s death, that of 1862. Not much literature or records are available that can be consulted with regard to the life accounts of Gurū Bālak Singh. The name of his father is believed to have been Dial Singh of Hazro.¹² It is whilst living as Ajapāl Singh that Gurū Gobind Singh must have

met Bālak Singh and found in him the qualities that were needed in his successor. Prior to having met Gurū Gobind Singh, Bālak Singh had led a pious and devoted life, but had always been in search of a gurū who could satisfy his spiritual quest.¹³ If Ajapāl Singh had been looking for a successor, and since the four *Sāhebzādhī* (sons of Gurū Gobind Singh) had already been killed by the Mughal authorities, then it was to Bālak Singh that he had turned. An important consideration is if the *Sāhebzādhī* had remained alive, then would gurūship have been transferred to them? Thus Bālak Singh is regarded as the eleventh Gurū by members of the Nāmdhāri community. But, then, how do the Nāmdhāris legitimize the *fait accompli* that the *Ādi Granth* was installed as the eternal Gurū, and is believed so by Sikhs at large? The Nāmdhāris answer this critical point by stating that there is no glimpse or hint whatsoever, in the Sikh religious writings of Gurū Gobind Singh, stating that the *Ādi Granth* is to be the eternal Gurū. They draw attention to the fact that the often repeated saying of

Gurū Maniyo Granth

(Regard the *Ādi Granth* as Gurū)

which is recited during the Sikh *ardās*¹⁴ was not composed or uttered by Gurū Gobind Singh, but is a mere addition by poets. Gurmit Singh highlights the point that the words are not found in the writings of Gurū Gobind Singh but, rather, appear in the *Panth Parkash*, a book published in 1880, which had been written by Giani Gian Singh.¹⁵ Thus, Nāmdhāris retain the belief that there is no original suggestion in the compositions of Gurū Gobind Singh that transfers gurūship to the *Ādi Granth*. Furthermore, the Nāmdhāris believe that the nature of the true Gurū, as indicated in the *Ādi Granth*, refers to a *living* being.¹⁶ For them scripture as true Gurū is an alien concept.

The Nāmdhāri acknowledgement of a succession of human Gurūs should, strictly speaking, make their position in the *Panth* as a whole, rather dubious. The ambiguity of their Sikh leaning is partially resolved by the concept of *mīrī-pīrī* in the Sikh tradition. This concept was introduced by the sixth Gurū Hargobind (1595–1644) to symbolize the temporal and spiritual authority of the Gurū. The spiritual authority, that is, the *pīrī* concept (derived from the Islamic term for a *pīr*, a spiritual leader) was present in the Sikh scriptures, which had been compiled by the previous Gurū, Arjan, in 1603–04. The temporal authority, that is, the *mīrī* (also an Islamic term used for a commander or a chieftain) was to be fulfilled by the human Gurū and the *Panth* collectively. From the time of the sixth Gurū to the tenth Gurū, therefore, this dual existence of the *Ādi Granth* and the human Gurū was an essential feature of the *Panth*. The justification from the Nāmdhāri point of view, therefore, is that if the *Ādi Granth* and the human Gurū complemented each other before 1708,¹⁷ then surely this tradition is vital to the survival and guidance of the *Panth* in the present period also? It is a view that is not without some justification.

Importantly, in the majority of cases, Nāmdhāris do not refer to Gurū Bālak Singh as the founder of the Nāmdhāris, neither is he referred to as the first Gurū of the Nāmdhāris. This title is bestowed on Gurū Rām Singh, Bālak Singh's successor. It is a point to which I shall return below. Yet, writing about the virtues of Bālak Singh, Harbans Singh certainly refers to Gurū Bālak Singh as the founder.¹⁸ He points out that: 'The founder, Bhai¹⁹ Balak Singh (1799–1862) of Hazro, was a holy man whose noble example and sweet persuasive manner won him a number of followers'.²⁰

The essential path of truthful living and *nām simran*, which had been originally stressed by Gurū Nānak and continued through his successors, along with the *rahit* of the *Khālsā*, were also stressed by Bālak Singh.²¹ Thus, in this respect, he carried on the task of the human Gurū as guiding the *Panth*. Emphasis on strict adherence towards maintaining the *Khālsā* form, promulgated by Gurū Bālak Singh, cannot be ignored for its contribution towards proclaiming outward Sikh identity after the death of Gurū Gobind Singh.

Gurū Bālak Singh, like his successor Gurū Rām Singh, was also watched closely by the British authorities.²² This is an important point, for it highlights the fact that Gurū Bālak Singh must have had a substantial number of followers – sizable enough to have been noticed by the British in India. Surveillance of him by the government is amply supported by the following letter, sent to Head Office by Mr Green, the then District Superintendent, in which he refers to the followers of Bālak Singh as *Jagīāsīs* (or *Habiāsīs*, which could also refer to *Abhiāsīs*).²³ The letter reads as follows:

12th June. Mr Green, Asstt (sic). District Superintendent of Police, Attock.

About 16 years ago, a Sikh named Balak Singh, caste, Arora, started a new sect of Sikhs at Hazru, in the Rawalpindi district. They were named Jagiasis (or Habiasis), and made large numbers of converts in the neighbourhood during their founder's lifetime.

Amongst his more favourite disciples were three:

- 1 Kahn Singh, who now is the head of the sect at Hazru;
- 2 Lal Singh, now resident at Amritsar.
- 3 Ram Singh, for some years past resident of village Bhaini, in Ludhiana, and the subject of these notes. On the death of their founder, which occurred some months ago, the members of the sect appear to have unanimously elected Ram Singh as his successor. Though the sect seems to have failed in the neighbourhood of Hazru since Balak Singh's death, it has thriven in the most remarkable manner in the district adjoining the home [of] his more energetic successor.²⁴

Since the letter states that Kahn Singh is the head of Hazro, it may be assumed that on becoming Gurū, Rām Singh had elected certain leaders for different districts. It is highly likely, however, that a sturdy Kūkā following probably

existed at only two places in the Punjab, that is, at Hazro where Gurū Bālak Singh had lived and, also, to where Gurū Rām Singh had moved initially; the second place was Bhaini, from where Gurū Rām Singh originated and to which he had now returned.

Hence, Gurū Bālak Singh chose Gurū Rām Singh as his successor, thus later becoming the twelfth Gurū according to the Nāmdhāris. Attitudes towards *zāt* are highlighted by the fact that, although Bālak Singh was an *arorā*, Gurū Rām Singh was from the *rāmgarhīā zāt*. Nevertheless, Gurū Rām Singh's successors all belong to the same family and, therefore, have also been *rāmgarhīā*.²⁵

Gurū Rām Singh had assumed gurūship while Bālak Singh was still alive. Traditional accounts state that Rām Singh formed the Nāmdhāri community on 12 April 1857: whereas the date of Bālak Singh's death has been widely accepted as being 1862. Why did Gurū Rām Singh assume gurūship while Bālak Singh was still alive? Nāmdhāris believe Gurū Bālak Singh had realized the fulfilment of the traditional prophecy in Gurū Rām Singh, that Gurū Gobind Singh would take rebirth as a *rāmgarhīā* and would once again become the Gurū of the Sikhs. Gurū Bālak Singh is seen as an intermediary between the tenth and twelfth Gurūs – an intermediary for the period in which Gurū Gobind Singh needed to take rebirth as Rām Singh, as Nāmdhāri tradition asserts: 'he [Guru Gobind Singh] bestowed Guruship on Balak Singh as a trustee saying that he would receive it back when he appears as a reincarnate in the name of Ram Singh at Bhaini'.²⁶

Gurū Rām Singh is regarded as the most important of the Nāmdhāri Gurūs since he is referred to as the founder of the Nāmdhāri Sikhs, and believed to be the reincarnation of Gurū Gobind Singh. The birth date of Rām Singh is traditionally given as 1816. He is hailed for his efforts and success in redirecting the lapsed *Panth* towards stringent practice of the *Khālsā* tradition, as well as creating the Nāmdhāri *Panth*, which became known as the *Sant Khālsā*, on 12 April 1857. Additionally, Gurū Rām Singh, and the actions and struggles of his followers in the fight for Indian Independence, are to be noted in India's struggle for Independence. It was a struggle clearly carried forward by each of his successors. Thus, his military contribution and his endeavours towards *Khālsā* stringency and, therefore, a promotion of *Khālsā* identity among his followers must be acknowledged. The latter is perhaps best illustrated in contemporary Nāmdhāri society by the fact that it is very rare to see a non-*kesdhārī* Nāmdhāri.

Briefly examining the life history of Gurū Rām Singh, one learns that he was born in a village called Bhaini of Ludhiana district in the Punjab: it is a place commonly referred to as Bhaini Sāhib by Nāmdhāris. It is assumed that, like the births of the Sikh Gurūs, Rām Singh's birth was also non-*karmic*. The *sakhī* (prophecy) that supports the incarnation of the tenth Gurū, is highlighted in the following document:

Guru Gobind Singh Sahai. I Guru Gobind Singh will be born in a carpenter shop, and may be called Ram Singh. My house will be between the Jamuna and the Sutlej rivers. I will declare my religion. I will defeat the *Feringhee* [British], and put the crown on my own head, and blow the “Sunkh” [trumpet of victory]. . . . I, the carpenter, will sit on the throne. When I have got 1,25,000 of Sikhs with me, I will cut off the heads of the *Feringhee*. I will never be conquered in battle, . . . Day by day Ram Singh’s rule will be enlarged. God has written this. It is not lie my brethren.²⁷

The reference that Gurū Gobind will be reborn into a carpenter shop clearly portrays Rām Singh’s birth into a *rāmgarhiā* family. His father owned a carpentry workshop that saw to the needs of the predominantly farming community of Bhaini, which lies between the Jamuna and Sutlej Rivers. The importance of Gurū Rām Singh as the awaited-for Gurū of the Nāmdhāris, who would fight in the struggles for independence, therefore, cannot be overestimated.

It was while he was in the army that Rām Singh came into contact with his predecessor, Bālak Singh at Hazro.²⁸ With regard to the bestowal of gurūship on Rām Singh, Gurcharan Singh Gian specifies that in 1841, at Hazro, the *gurgaddī* was offered to Rām Singh by Gurū Bālak Singh.²⁹ Earlier, it was stated by Fauja Singh Bajwa that the first meeting between Bālak Singh and Rām Singh had taken place in 1841. Therefore the *gurgaddī* was offered to Rām Singh on his first encounter with Gurū Bālak Singh.³⁰

Rām Singh remained in the army until the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. Traditional accounts of the Nāmdhāris recall that Rām Singh had become extremely disheartened by the state of affairs in British-ruled Punjab, leading to Rām Singh’s revolt against British power in India. In addition to the political orientation of his followers, Gurū Rām Singh was also responsible for their religious revival. By this period, the Sikh community (as indicated in [Chapter One](#)) had become rather lapsed in its adherence to the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs, resorting to such practices as the assistance of *brāhmins* for rituals, as well as the consumption of alcohol. Gurū Rām Singh’s struggle for spiritual, as well as political freedom has been asserted by Bali and Bali, who write: ‘He [Rām Singh] soon began to understand that freedom was something much more than political freedom. It meant social and spiritual freedom too’.³¹ Subsequently, a group of freedom fighters, sharing affection for the emancipation of Mother India, began to assemble – with Rām Singh as their leader.

Militancy and religious revival promoted, hand in hand, the issue of Sikh identity. The Sikhs, according to Gurū Rām Singh, therefore, could not free India until they were saintly in their everyday lives. Indeed, the concept of *mūrī-pīrī* was continued by Gurū Rām Singh. He, as the twelfth Sikh Gurū, guided the *Panth* both in the spiritual and temporal sense, in the same manner as his predecessors from Gurū Hargobind onwards had done. Importantly, according

to Nāmdhāris, Gurū Rām Singh had not started something new; he was carrying on with Sikh tradition as had been instigated by his predecessors. In this respect, the role of the Nāmdhāri Gurūs, in relation to Sikh identity is a very important one.

Emphasis on the fact that the revolt led by Gurū Rām Singh was not to be portrayed as a military organization alone needs to be continuously underlined. Rām Singh's insistence on truthful living is stressed by Bali and Bali. They write:

Although he taught his followers to sacrifice their lives for their motherland and their faith, he did not teach violence and militance for greed and idle grandeur. It was not just another military organisation. It was a sect of good commonfolk, patriots, peaceful peasants and hardworking ordinary craftsmen, who sought to live an honest and just life, clean, tolerant and full of humanity. But they had to be a special kind of warriors. They were to preserve and not to destroy the great cultural values of their own country.³²

Important events for the Nāmdhāris took place on the eve of *baisākhī*, 1857: this was the first time that Gurū Rām Singh and his followers were to be collectively known as the Kūkās among themselves, and among the Punjabi community at large.³³ The creation of the *Sant Khālsā* by Rām Singh took place in his village of Bhaini Sāhib; hence, Bhaini became the official headquarters of the Kūkās and remains so to the present day. Values and ideals instituted in the original *Khālsā* in 1699, by Gurū Gobind Singh, were now reinstated and re-emphasized by Gurū Rām Singh. All present were required to take *amrit*, 'nectar', and were to live a life in observance of the *Khālsā* as stated in the *rahit*. Noticeably, Kūkās believe that, prior to the formation of the *Sant Khālsā*, initiation was not openly available to women. Thus, they believe that Gurū Rām Singh's encouraging women to take *amrit* was a radical reform resulting in the mass initiation of women into the *Panth* for the first time. The Kūkās were renowned for their *Khālsā* adherence, and were at once recognized by their white horizontal turbans and their white homespun clothing. Gurū Rām Singh was in effect strengthening Sikh identity as constituting *amritdhārīs*.

How far, then, did the efforts of Gurū Rām Singh have significance for the wider *Panth*? My view is that it was not as influential as the *Tāt Khālsā*. The *Tāt Khālsā*'s emphasis on becoming *amritdhārī*, I suggest, had a greater affect on the issue of Sikh identity for the *Panth* as a whole than the efforts of Gurū Rām Singh. The *Tāt Khālsā* did not introduce radical changes in the concept of guruship as the Nāmdhāris had.

Many new rules were instituted at the formation of the *Sant Khālsā*: all followers were to wear the *mālā*, a white rosary with 108 knots. Additionally, since the wearing of the *kirpān* had been banned by the government, Kūkās were instead to wear axes, which were referred to as *lathis*.³⁴ It was also on this day that Rām Singh hoisted the triangular white flag of the Kūkās: this is

displayed outside all Nāmdhāri centres worldwide to the present day, instead of the saffron *niśān sāhib* found outside *gurdwārās* of the general *Panth*. Regarding the white flag, S.S. Jeet has stated:

The first triangular white flag of the Indian Independence Movement – which symbolises Truth, Purity, Simplicity, Peace and Unity was hoisted by the 12th Guru – Sri Satguru Ram Singh Ji Maharaj on the eve of the Baisakhi Festival – 1st Baisakh Samat 1914³⁵ ... when Sri Satguru Ji inaugurated the SANT KHALSA (also known as Nāmdhāri Sikh Panth) ...³⁶

The *Sant Khālsā*, that is, the Saint-Soldiers, which the Kūkās had now become, regarded themselves as the fulfillers of Gurū Gobind's following declaration:

To be a Khalsa is to be a lion, is to tolerate no oppression, is to be a life long warrior in the propagation of virtue.³⁷

Here again, the imbalance between maintaining the *Khālsā* form and heresy, on behalf of the Nāmdhāris, is evident. Although, on the one hand, the *Sant Khālsā* is the Saint-Soldier aspiration of the tenth Gurū, paradoxically his proclamation of the *Ādi Granth* as *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is not accepted by the Nāmdhāris. In terms of corporate, uniform Sikh identity, therefore, the Nāmdhāris would not be able to conform.

An important remit is how far Rām Singh was asserting his supreme authority over that of Gurū Gobind's by re-enacting the original *Khālsā* ceremony? Although the ideals of the original *Khālsā* ceremony are strengthened whenever there is a gathering of the *pañj pyāre* and the initiation of followers, Rām Singh had gone a step further and had instituted a new group of *Sant Khālsā*. Although they were to follow the rules of the *rahit*, certain practices would have distinguished them as being specifically Kūkās. His actions might be justified if one remembers that Gurū Rām Singh is regarded as a reincarnation of Gurū Gobind Singh and was, therefore, reinstating in 1857 what he had already done in 1699, in his previous existence. However, the creation of the *Sant Khālsā* created a distinction between Kūkās and other Sikhs; the Kūkās became something of a 'sect' or a 'cult'. Inevitably, the question has to be asked whether Gurū Rām Singh was reinforcing *general Khālsā* identity or had he in actual fact laid the foundation for a *separatist* Sikh identity? I suggest the latter, since the Nāmdhāris are a group within the *Panth* and do not find acceptance of their concept of gurūship among the *Panth* as a whole. Bali and Bali allude to the idea that the Kūkās 'were always to remember that their cult was born in the *baisākhī* season',³⁸ and this endorses the sense of separation between Kūkās and the *Panth*. Nevertheless, the importance of the original *Khālsā* ceremony performed by Gurū Gobind Singh was never to be underestimated.³⁹

In his struggle for independence, Gurū Rām Singh introduced the concepts of non-cooperation and *swadeśī*. That is, to boycott all British services and goods.

Additionally, the Kūkās resisted the so-called ‘educational advancement’ of India by refusing to learn the English language; they were going to remain wholeheartedly Indian in every respect. As is expected, the Kūkā movement had by now taken on an increasingly political role; the Kūkās could not tolerate the pain caused by a foreign power that treated the people of India as second-class citizens. Gurū Rām Singh was the first Indian freedom fighter to employ this non-cooperation stance. This concept was to be adopted also by Mahatma Gandhi sixty years later in his struggle for Indian Independence. As a result of the *swadesī* ideal, the Kūkās refused to wear garments that had been made from material imported from Britain: instead they wore only homespun clothing. This is visibly carried forward to the present day, where the more conformist Kūkās, in the diaspora also, will wear only garments made from *khaddar*, a type of coarse cotton from India. In sum, Gurū Rām Singh’s non-cooperation strategy contained the following aims:

- 1 Boycott of Government services.
- 2 Boycott of educational institutions opened by the British.
- 3 Boycott of law courts started by the British.
- 4 Boycott of foreign-made goods.
- 5 To refuse to obey and resist the laws and orders which one’s conscience abhors.⁴⁰

Therefore, by boycotting British goods and services, *every* Kūkā of pre-Independent India was effectively playing his or her individual role in the struggle.⁴¹ It must not be assumed that because the Kūkās had become politically involved in gaining Indian independence that religion and social practices had taken a back seat. It is in this matter that the following of Gurū Rām Singh had become distinct from other freedom fighters of the period. This in turn, although strengthening the *Khālsā* ideal, was nevertheless splintering Sikh identity in terms of belief, since the Kūkās were so obviously the group who denied Gurū status to the *Ādī Granth*.

Owing to the lapsing of religion in the *Panth* at large, Gurū Rām Singh had introduced certain reforms among the Nāmdhārī community, at the foremost of which was the paradigm of simplicity. Weddings were to be simplified to a great extent and the practice of large dowries among the Kūkās was totally abolished. Such was the emphasis on simplicity that the practice of mass marriages became popular among the Kūkās. The practice of mixed *zāt* marriages was now taking place among the Kūkās. As long as the couple were followers of the Kūkā tradition, their *zāt* did not matter: this practice is carried on to the present day. This factor again endorses a specific identity for the Nāmdhāris. In this respect, they were egalitarian to a greater extent than the Sikh Gurūs themselves who had observed *zāt* distinctions in matrimonial matters. Additionally, places of worship were not to be extolled for their expensive architecture or belongings; they were to be primarily centres for

attaining peace. An attitude towards an inexpensive lifestyle must have been meaningful to the Kūkās, the majority of whom came from poor backgrounds.⁴² *nām simran* was placed on the highest level, hence the term ‘Nāmdhārī’. The revolution led by Gurū Rām Singh thus consisted of two strands: an outward revolution against the British in India, as well as an inward revolution that proclaimed the *Khālsā* according to traditional Sikh values.

Early British attitudes towards Rām Singh, and the Kūkās, are highlighted in the following report, sent as early as June 1863 to Head Office by Mr T.D. Forsyth, the Officiating Secretary to the Government, Punjab:

5. But advantage is taken of his movement to circulate paper, whether true or false, in his name, which contain matter dangerous to the public welfare... there is undoubtedly an impression abroad that he is setting himself up as a future king, who is to drive the British out of the Punjab...⁴³

From 1863 onwards, Rām Singh was kept under strict surveillance by the British. That the Kūkās were seen as a marked threat is apparent in the following report, written three years later, on 11 September 1866, by Colonel R.G. Taylor, the Commissioner and Superintendent of Ambala:

You will remember that in June last I reported demi-officially, for His Honour... that Ram Singh of Bhainee had with his followers been conducting himself in such a manner that I had thought it advisable to reimpose the restriction on his liberty which had been partially relaxed... 18th March 1866. 2. The result has been the same throughout, namely, that the opinion of one and all has been that the sect is a mischievous one, and that its existence and especially its rapid increase threatens disturbance sooner or later... 5. I am distinctly of opinion, however that the time is come for taking serious notice of proceedings of this agitator... and his sect. 6. I am therefore of opinion that the following measures should be adopted at once: 1st:- That Ram Singh be arrested and removed far away from the scene of his present machinations. This might be done via Lahore and Mooltan to Bombay or by Delhi to Calcutta, but the former would be preferable... 8. It is my thorough belief that those lads mean war sooner or later, and I strongly recommend my Government to be beforehand with them... 12. It is my object to show that we disapprove of this agitation: our doing so will discourage many half-gulled, novitiates, while it will, I know, be a relief to the minds of our well-wishers to see that we have the matter in mind and do not intend to be played tricks with...⁴⁴

An interesting comment made in the same report reads as follows:

17. Ram Singh may have commenced as a mild religious reformer on the fashion of Nanuk, but his stirring Lieutenants are hurrying him into a more near imitation of the warlike Gooroo Gobind...⁴⁵

These words imply that the government was curious as to the religious affiliation of the Kūkās. They were probably aware that Rām Singh was an important leader amongst the group, but what they probably did not realize

fully was that he was in actual fact regarded as the incarnation of the tenth Sikh Gurū and was proclaimed as the twelfth Gurū by the Kūkās, and not just a ‘mild religious reformer’. To the government the *Panth* must have appeared to be unified rather than being characterized by different emerging groups. Thus, as highlighted in [Chapter One](#), Sikh identity for the government consisted of the belief in ten Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* as eternal Gurū.

Viewed as a continuing threat by the British, Rām Singh was exiled to Rangoon, Burma in March 1872. This did not mean, however, that his followers had lost all contact with him and that the Kūkā following had declined. Secretly, Gurū Rām Singh managed to pass letters, in the form of *hukamnāmās*,⁴⁶ to his followers, who would travel great distances and risk their lives to keep contact with their Gurū. In September 1880 Rām Singh was moved on to Mergui Jail, due to his having retained contacts with the Kūkās. While in Mergui, reports hint of Rām Singh’s alleged violent phases: this, according to the officers, was due to his ‘prolonged retention in confinement; removal to Mergui, and the discovery of his attempts to communicate with his friends’.⁴⁷ According to government records, it was while in exile in Mergui that Gurū Rām Singh died on 29 November 1885. Documentation states explicitly that Rām Singh died after serious bouts of diarrhoea, the Civil Surgeon at Mergui reports that:

The man has been in a decline sometime past, and with the setting in of the cold weather, he has had another attack of Diarrhoea and he complained of the change very much ... he succumbed to the present attack and died quiet (*sic*) exhausted at 4.30 P.M. in my presence ... I have arranged for the cremation of the body at about 8 O’ clock tomorrow morning and that I shall be present at the burial place early to see to the necessary arrangements being completed for the burning according to the Hindu custom.⁴⁸

This belief is, however, totally rejected by the Nāmdhāris.

Another report sent by the Civil Surgeon, confirms Rām Singh’s cremation as having taken place during the morning of 30 November 1885.⁴⁹ So why do the Nāmdhāris not believe that their Gurū had died in Mergui? Nāmdhāri tradition affirms that when Gurū Hari Singh received his brother’s belongings, they were not genuine.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Kūkās believe that the writing of the report was a mere act and that Rām Singh had now been moved on to a different, secret location. Nāmdhāris believe that Gurū Rām Singh will live until the age of 250. This is perhaps best justified in the words spoken by Rām Singh himself while on his way to exile in 1872: he is believed to have said that ‘this body can sustain for 250 years’.⁵¹ It has also been stated that Rām Singh managed to escape from the Mergui Jail in 1885 and, in order to defend themselves the report was made up by the authorities.⁵²

It is due to the belief that Gurū Rām Singh is yet alive and will return to be among his followers that the successors of Rām Singh are not referred to as the

13th, 14th and 15th Gurūs, but are, rather, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd successors of Rām Singh. Thus the successors of Gurū Rām Singh assume the role of ‘deputy Gurūs’, looking after the Nāmdhāri community until the return of Gurū Rām Singh. For this same reason, Gurū Rām Singh’s *gaddī* ‘seat’ at Bhaini Sāhib remains unoccupied. It is in their separation and awaiting Gurū Rām Singh that Kūkās frequently sing in great *bhairāg*, in great yearning and longing for him. The successor of Gurū Rām Singh was his younger brother, Harī Singh.

Gurū Harī Singh was born in September 1819. He took on the role of Gurū from 1885 until his death in 1906. The Nāmdhāris adopted a more peaceful approach to Independence after Gurū Rām Singh had been exiled to Rangoon. Gurū Harī Singh, was confined to the village of Bhaini, and strict curfews applied to him. He was not permitted to move out of the village of Bhaini for the whole of the twenty-one years that he was Gurū.⁵³ By this period, the Nāmdhāris were being stringently watched by the government; furthermore, meetings of more than five Nāmdhāris were banned. Due to these immense restrictions, the approach of the Nāmdhāris changed to one of non-militancy. It is a peaceful, pacifist nature that is characteristic of the Nāmdhāri community worldwide today.

Prior to his death in 1906, Gurū Harī Singh chose his youngest son, Partāp Singh to become his successor. Partāp Singh, who had been born in 1890, became Gurū at the age of sixteen. Partāp Singh extended his support, along with the whole of the Kūkā followers, towards Mahatma Gandhi for India’s Independence.⁵⁴ It was during the period of Partāp Singh’s gurūship that India finally gained Independence from the British on 15 August 1947. Partāp Singh enjoyed Indian Independence for twelve years. On his death in 1959, it was one of his sons: Jagjīt Singh,⁵⁵ who became his successor, and who is the present Spiritual Head of Nāmdhāris worldwide. Thus far, the contribution of the Kūkās to Sikh identity in its political history is clear. Today the Kūkās are hence renowned as the freedom fighters of India.

Gurū Jagjīt Singh was born on 22 November 1920, thus assuming the role of Gurū at the age of thirty-nine. Although Jagjīt Singh’s headquarters remain situated at Bhaini Sāhib, his visits to Nāmdhāris all over the world are frequent. Since Gurū Rām Singh and his successors belonged to the same family and are from the village of Bhaini Sāhib, the Nāmdhāri headquarters continue to be situated there. Furthermore, Bhaini is of importance since this is where the *Sant Khālsā* was originally initiated and formed. The village has become an important pilgrimage site for the Nāmdhāris. Gurū Jagjīt Singh’s reception is extremely notable on his visits across the world, and as many as possible of his followers will attend a place in order to receive the *darśan* (‘a sight of’, and blessing) of the Gurū. The Gurū’s *darśan* is seen as being of utmost importance in maintaining community adherence in the diaspora, and equally important for youngsters to create and maintain bonds with the Nāmdhāri tradition. All the Gurū’s air travel costs and arrangements while visiting a certain country, as



3.1 Gurū Jagīt Singh's position among the Nāmdhāris

well as those of his closest devotees who accompany him wherever he goes, are met by the Nāmdhāri *saṅgat* themselves. The photograph in [Figure 3.1](#) is of Jagīt Singh, during his visit to Forest Gate, London, on 30 November 1997. Attention needs to be given to the actual position of the Gurū's seating: the *chatrī*, canopy, over his head and the metal surrounding in which he sits. Both are reminiscent of the similar placement of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in non-Nāmdhāri *gurdwārās*. In his absence it is to this position at the foot of the encasement to which Kūkās will bow down:

Jagīt Singh has been called a 'crusader for peace and social justice',⁵⁶ he is a member of the World Council of Peace.⁵⁷ This portrays the Nāmdhāri stance towards achieving world peace and harmony, and further illustrates the pacifist nature of followers of the Nāmdhāri tradition. The tradition of enjoyment of classical music, which was stressed among the Nāmdhāris by Gurū Partāp Singh,

is fervently emphasised also by Gurū Jagjīt Singh. Music festivals have been held across the world in the honour of the present Gurū. The Gurū and the Nāmdhāris as a whole, have no political role at present. The political struggle for India's Independence having been achieved, the aim of the Nāmdhāris is to keep India united, not divided; hence Nāmdhāris oppose the demand for Khalistan.

By his followers, Gurū Jagjīt Singh is referred to as *His Holiness Shri Satgurū Jagjīt Singh Ji Mahārāj*. Many miracles are associated with Jagjīt Singh. An often cited one is of his involvement in the 1976 droughts in Britain. It is believed that it was Jagjīt Singh's presence and prayers while in Britain that caused it to rain. Other miracles also recall how his presence in barren lands results in the growing of fruits and crops. It is also believed by the Nāmdhāris that ailments can be cured by the Gurū's blessing on his devout believers. Thus, his highly spiritual nature is, indeed, widely acknowledged among his followers. One such follower, Gurudev Sharan, writes thus about the spiritual nature of Jagjīt Singh:

Whoever comes in contact with this supreme spiritual personality gets inspired with the Name and holy scriptures. Qualities like truth, purity, service, sacrifice, non-attachment, benevolence and modesty radiate from his personality. His aim in life is to follow the path of the Dharam (virtue) and guide other (*sic*) along this path.⁵⁸

Beliefs Emphasized in the Nāmdhāri Tradition

Apart from one *major* difference, the main philosophical beliefs of the Nāmdhāris concerning God, the human condition, *karma*, *Nadar*, *Hukam*, *samsāra* are essentially in line with general Sikh belief.⁵⁹ The major, and substantial, difference between Nāmdhāris and non-Nāmdhāri Sikhs is the formers' belief in human Gurūs.

The deh-dhārī Gurū

The *deh-dhārī* Gurū, refers to the tradition of a living, human Gurū, that is, the Gurū in bodily form, as opposed to general Sikh belief of scripture as Gurū. Thus the words '*Gurū Maniyo Granth*' recited during the Sikh *ardās* have no significance for the Kūkās, and are, therefore, not recited during the Nāmdhāri *ardās*. The rejection of the *Ādi Granth* as Gurū by Nāmdhāris, is a clear indication that the Nāmdhāris are a Sikh group that is *different* from all other Sikhs. When present, Nāmdhāris will bow in front of the *Ādi Granth* to show respect, but only for *gurbānī* contained within it. During worship and the performance of rituals, equal importance is given to both the *Ādi Granth* and

the *Dasam Granth*, these are the writings of the tenth Gurū. His compositions are not present in the *Ādi Granth*. Attributing equal importance to these two scriptures is indicative of a definitive difference between Nāmdhāri and general Sikh practice. The *Ādi Granth* is the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* for the *Panth*, it is the eternal Gurū, no other can take its place. However, by denying gurūship to the *Ādi Granth*, the Nāmdhāris cannot be regarded as supporting corporate Sikh identity through uniformity of belief and practice.

In attempting to be as traditional as possible, the Nāmdhāris carry on the ways and customs as practised from the inauguration of the Sikh faith. Importantly, in doing so, they treat the *Ādi Granth* in the same manner as after its compilation by the fifth Sikh Gurū. During the period of Gurū Arjan's gurūship onwards, human Gurū and *Ādi Granth* guided the community side-by-side. Thus, the need for a human Gurū to guide the community and see to its needs is a point about which the Nāmdhāris are adamant. In his role as Gurū, Rām Singh protected the *Panth* as a whole from British oppression. Furthermore, the spiritual aspect was never overshadowed by the militant. Gurū Rām Singh continuously emphasized saintliness by adopting the *Khālsā* form among the Kūkās.

Nāmdhāris, therefore, view the role of the human Gurū as being of utmost importance in the guidance of the community. It is only a *human* Gurū who can respond and adapt to changing circumstances. The human Gurū is vital for the continual guidance of Nāmdhāri Sikhs. Furthermore, there is no hint in *gurbānī* that states there are to be ten human Gurūs only. Nāmdhāris take literally the words of the *Ādi Granth*, which state that the rule of the Gurū is to remain permanent:

Imperishable and Immovable is the rule of the reverend Guru, for such is the command of the Primal Lord. (AG 1390)⁶⁰

The above words indicate that the rule of the Gurū will always remain. For Sikhs generally, this implies eternal authority that has been vested in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. The Nāmdhāris however, contradict this fundamental belief. Since *Sikh* is translated as 'disciple', Nāmdhāris argue that surely this must mean that the *śiṣyah* ('disciple')⁶¹ needs a Gurū to offer guidance and advice to the changing contingencies of society? They poignantly affirm that:

Guru is not bound in time-limit. He was and will be present in every age as he is badly needed by us, the humanbeings, in every period; for there is no knowledge without him and no Emancipation without the knowledge. He therefore does incarnate in every age.⁶²

Nāmdhāris draw attention to the words of Gurū Amardās, who highlighted that without the Gurū's guidance, the individual cannot gain *mukti* (AG 361). Yet, it must be remembered that these hymns were composed by the earlier Gurūs, who probably believed that the lineage of human Gurūs would always continue.

But by investing gurūship eternally in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, was Gurū Gobind Singh actually ignoring the precepts of *bāṇī*? Gurū Gobind Singh's institution of the *Ādi Granth* to that of the eternal Gurū of the *Panth* was an important measure that needed to be taken in the early eighteenth century. By this time, many rivals had set themselves up as Gurūs and this was causing schism in the *Panth*. Thus, to end rival sects, the tenth Gurū brought the line of human succession to an end. Temporal authority was vested in the *Panth* itself, with spiritual strength contained within *gurbāṇī*.

In replica of the selection of the ten Sikh Gurūs, the Nāmdhāri Gurū is not elected, but is recognized by his gifts of spirituality and ability to guide others towards *mukti*. Since no elections take place, the Gurū is not called a leader but, rather, the spiritual Head or Guide. The present Gurū will nominate his successor himself. Like the Sikh Gurūs, the Nāmdhāri Gurūs have all been males; unlike the Sikh Gurūs, however, the Nāmdhāri Gurūs, with the exception of Bālak Singh, are of the *rāmgarhīā zāt*. The present Gurū's decision is final on all matters, social and religious. Thus, for the Nāmdhāris, the supreme authority is *their* living Gurū and not the Shromanī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which has no control over Gurū Jagjīt Singh. The Nāmdhāris have no cabinet of selected persons, but there are the Gurūs' closest followers who accompany him wherever he goes. Yet, as pointed out earlier, the *gurgaddī* at Bhaini Sāhib remains unoccupied in view of the belief that Gurū Rām Singh is to return and guide his followers through the present era.

The Nāmdhāris believe they are advancing both socially and religiously with the tradition of living Gurūs. Socially, in that a human Gurū can respond to contemporary issues and religiously, because the guidance of a human Gurū is continuously present for the community. It is reiterated that this tradition is not new: far from it, they are following the *maryādā*, the tradition, of the successorship of Gurūs. In the same manner as the Gurūs responded to changing circumstances and enabled the continuity of the *Panth* so, too, is this carried forward to the present day. Thus, the Nāmdhāri response to the present era can be called modern.

Nām simran

Extremely important among the Nāmdhāris is the practice of *nām simran*. The *nām* is to be captured in each heart; thus giving rise to the very term 'Nāmdhāri'. Since the human condition is one of suffering, it is *nām simran*, or rather *nām japnā*, that enables the individual to tread the path towards *mukti*, ultimate release being dependent on the *Nadar*, the Grace, of *Wāhegurū*: a belief central to Sikh philosophy as a whole. The importance attached to *nām simran* is highlighted by Gurū Arjan:

Contemplating the Lord's Name and ever uttering the Master's praises in the saint's society, O Nanak, immaculate becomes the mortal. (AG 1357)⁶³

A unique practice among the Nāmdhāris is the giving of a *gurmantar* – a secret *mantar* on which the devotee meditates – by a ritual known as *nām lenā*, 'to receive the *gurmantar*'.⁶⁴ The *gurmantar* is imparted by the present Gurū. Therefore, on his visits to the diaspora, followers who have not already done so, will become part of the Nāmdhāri community by receiving a *gurmantar*. Devout followers, who may perform this very important ritual on his behalf, are also selected by the Gurū. The giving of a secret *gurmantar* appears to be unique to the Nāmdhāris. Nāmdhāris postulate that the practice of giving *gurmantar* to the devotee is a ritual that was practised by the Sikh Gurūs also.⁶⁵ Since the *gurmantar* given to the Kūkā is to remain a secret, *nām simran* is performed quietly to oneself. This is in sharp contrast to the participation in *kīrtan* among the Nāmdhāris that is sung aloud, often ecstatically.

Kīrtan

It is the ecstatic singing aloud of *kīrtan* that has earned the Nāmdhāris the name of Kūkā, which is derived from the word 'kūk', 'to shriek'. The *kīrtan* is also called *hali dā dīwān*, meaning loud singing. The participants in *hali dā dīwān* lose themselves in the singing in a kind of mystical trance. This feature is unique to the Nāmdhāris. To accompany *kīrtan*, only classical Indian instruments are used. Nāmdhāris rigidly adhere to the following hymn composed by Gurū Amardās in which he advocates singing in the praise of God:

Attuned to Thee, Thine devotees ever sing Thy praise...

Singing the True Lords (*sic*) praise through true melody, I am absorbed in the True One. (AG 1068)⁶⁶

Although *kīrtan* is a common feature of all *gurdwārās*, its 'trance-like' involvement is only found among the Nāmdhāris. Again, the fact is apparent that in attempting to adhere to *gurbāṇī* literally, the Nāmdhāris tend to deviate from Sikh practice generally, and incorporate practices that are responsible for diversity in the *Panth* and render uniform Sikh identity as impossible.

Nāmdhāri sakhīs (prophecies)

There are a number of *sakhīs* that are fervently held by the Nāmdhāris. These *sakhīs* were found by the Kūkās in a tank/pool at the village of Haripur, Sirsa District in 1876.⁶⁷ Perhaps one of the most important *sakhīs* is that Gurū Gobind Singh will re-incarnate and be reborn into a carpenter's family. This reincarnation is acknowledged by the Kūkās *only*, as Gurū Rām Singh. The *sakhī* foretells that:

The 12th Guru will be the most perfect and the greatest; will be born as a carpenter's son; and will begin his devotions at the age of 5.⁶⁸

Such is the importance of belief in these *sakhīs* that those Nāmdhāris who did not believe in the prophecies were to be 'cut off from the congregation'.⁶⁹ What is clear is that the Nāmdhāris dearly hold these prophecies and stringently regard the succession of Gurūs as being justified in *gurbāṇī*.

Nāmdhāri Praxis: Adherence or Deviation?

There are a number of practices that take place among the followers of the Nāmdhāri tradition that are clearly different from those taking place in general Sikh custom. The differences are significant enough to suggest the impossibility of Nāmdhāris being part of a uniform, corporate Sikh identity.

The Nāmdhāri Rehat Maryādā

The essence of the Kūkā way of life is simplicity and calmness. These have been highlighted in the Nāmdhāri *Rehat Maryādā*, as instituted by Gurū Rām Singh.⁷⁰ The very fact that the Nāmdhāris have a *Rehat Maryādā*, distinct from the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, has clear implications for the issue of a uniform Sikh identity. In accordance with their *Rehat Maryādā* the Nāmdhāris are stringent vegetarians. In contrast, the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* does not require vegetarianism; it places an injunction on *halāl* meat only. Nāmdhāri respect for all life forms is shown in day-to-day living. In addition to the ban on alcohol, followers take care not to consume intoxicants. This includes a total abstinence from tea and coffee; in place of tea, *chātā* is served in the home and during *laṅgar*, it is milk boiled with Indian spices, but no tea leaf.

The more stringent Nāmdhāris are known as Sodhīs and take utmost care in everything they do, including what they consume. The present Gurū and his closest disciples can be included in this group. Sodhīs do not form a sect within the Nāmdhāri tradition but are noted for their extreme religious observance. Sodhīs will not drink tap water, since it is considered unclean: they will usually carry a *garbī* with them, this is a steel container in which the water is kept. Most Nāmdhāris prefer to drink bottled water, for the same reasons. Some, who do not have easy access to river or spring water, will also bathe from bottled water. *Amrit* is never prepared with tap water. *Karāh prasād* is made with milk if there is no spring water available. In most cases the *prasād* is usually dry, that is, fruits and nuts. *Karāh prasād* is usually made for *bhogs* and other special religious ceremonies. Food is stringently checked for ingredients, and cakes and so on must be retin-free. Since the Kūkās are very scrupulous about what

they eat, and with whom they eat, they usually prepare their own food when in the company of non-Nāmdhāri hosts.

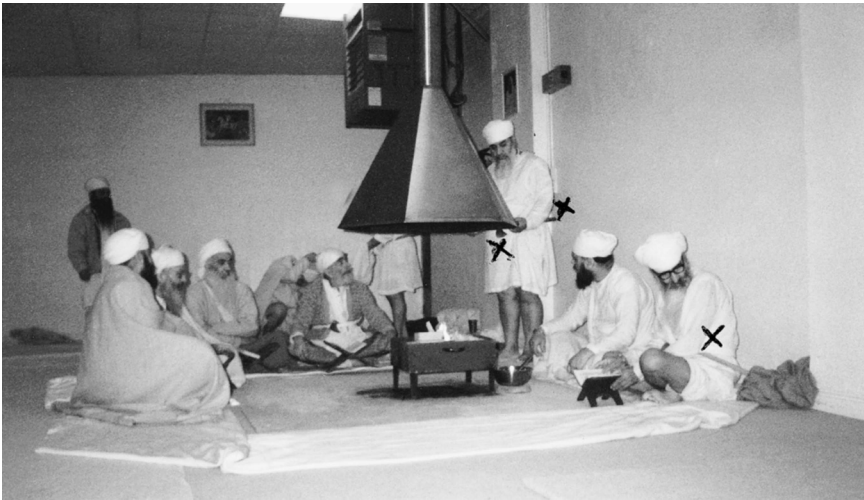
Pacifism

Nāmdhāris do not wear *kirpāns*, and one reason for this may be due to their pacifist outlook. However, another reason is due to the ban on *kirpāns* in Gurū Rām Singh's period, during which he commanded the Kūkās to wear axes, referred to as *lathīs*. These are also worn by a number of Nāmdhāris to the present day. The wearing of *lathīs* by the Kūkās is illustrated in the photograph in Figure 3.2, which was taken during the preparation for *havan*, the fire ceremony, prior to the celebrations of *holā mohallā*, in Birmingham, England.

The *lathī* is clearly illustrated by X marked in Figure 3.2. Shiv Lal points out that historians have suggested that the non-wearing of the *kirpān* is 'symbolic of the Nāmdhāris' faith in a non-violent political creed'.⁷¹ To what extent this is true is debatable, for the *lathī*, too, seems to suggest overtones of militancy. The carrying of the *lathī*, nevertheless, is not a common feature, the majority of Nāmdhāris – including the present Gurū – do not carry it.

Nāmdhāri Dress

Another physical characteristic of the Nāmdhāris is the prominence given to the colour white. During communal worship especially, it would be very unusual



3.2 Preparation for a Nāmdhāri *havan*

to see a Nāmdhāri wearing brightly coloured, or dark clothes. The colour white is symbolic of spiritual, as well as physical, purity – an aspect of utmost importance for Nāmdhāris. The turban of the Nāmdhāri is always of the colour white, and is tied horizontally across the forehead. This style is, apparently, reminiscent of the manner in which Gurū Nānak is portrayed as having tied his turban: thus, the aim is towards very traditional practices. On the whole, Kūkās, both male and female, child and adult, will not wear the *salwār*, that is the loose, flared bottoms worn with a long tunic: this, they believe, is a Muslim fashion. So, instead the *pujamā* is worn. These are the tight-fitting trousers worn with the long tunic. The wearing of gold jewellery, which has become a sign of one's social position, especially among Sikhs generally, is not observed by Kūkās. Nāmdhāris dress in a simple style: poor and rich dress alike.

Havan: the Fire Ceremony

A distinctive ritual among the Nāmdhāris is that of *havan*, also referred to as *jag* (*yajñā*). This is the fire ceremony performed before all major celebrations; it may also be requested by, or performed on behalf of, a follower. It is believed that *havan* is performed to cleanse the mind, whether individual or communal, of evil and impurity. Nevertheless, the performance of *havan* is a major contradiction of the teachings of Gurū Nānak, who rejected outright the performance of rituals, in favour of interiorized religion (AG 1169). However, popular religion needs some tangibility with which to express devotion, and in this respect, ritual found its way into Sikh practice. Above all, the taking of *amrit* at the *Khālsā* ceremony is an example *per se* of the presence of ritual in Sikhism. The Nāmdhāris, therefore, cannot be regarded to have deviated from the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs in the performance of *havan*. Indeed, Gurū Nānak also spoke against pilgrimage, yet the third Gurū constructed the *baolī* at Goindwal, which became a pilgrimage centre for Sikhs. These measures were seen as necessary for the continuation of the *Panth*.

The correct performance of *havan*, is highlighted in the Nāmdhāri *Rehat Maryādā*.⁷² The actual ritual lasts about forty-five minutes, and is performed during the early hours of the morning. *Kīrtan* is sung throughout the ceremony by the *rāgīs*, musicians. Each person who is taking part in the performance of the ritual, takes *amrit* immediately before its commencement. In turn, each of the participants, who are usually males, takes his place around the *jag* square. In total there are seven participants, five to read the sacred verses, one to add incense to the fire, and a seventh to sprinkle water onto it.

At the beginning of the ritual, the Nāmdhāri *maryādā* is stipulated by placing a coconut wrapped in cloth into the fire. I was told that this replaced the ancient Hindu custom of sacrificing an animal or human head for *yajñā*. Due to the pacifist nature of the Kūkās, a coconut is used because of its visible similarity to a head. Interestingly, the *havan* ceremony of the Nāmdhāris is very

similar to Hindu fire rituals. Its practice is also followed by the Zoroastrian religion and may, therefore, reflect a very ancient tradition. According to Nāmdhāris, the *havan* ceremony was undertaken by the Sikh Gurūs too, thus they retain its performance as necessary in order for the traditional *maryādā* to be continued, as stated by the following words:

Havan is also another performance of great importance. Before commencing any ceremony or inauguration of a concern sacred fire is lit. During the regime of all the preceeding Gurus this practice had been carried on at all functions. Guru Gobind Singh before instituting the Khalsa Panth, performed Havan about a year and spent a huge sum more than a lac.⁷³

This emphasis on tradition, doing things as they were in the period of the Sikh Gurūs, leads the Nāmdhāris to be seen as separatist, and not part of the uniform Sikh identity as desired by the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*.

After the completion of *havan*, *kaṛāh prasād* is brought into the worship hall and all stand while it is carried into the hall. *Amrit* is then prepared again, since those who had participated in the *havan* are pure enough to make *amrit* for those wishing to take it. The *amritdhārīs* read the following compositions, while another person stirs the sugar crystals into the water: *japī*, *jap*, *chaupai*, *anand sāhib* and *savaiyas*. *Kaṛāh prasād* is prepared once again for the completion of the *amrit* ceremony. Hence *kaṛāh prasād* is prepared each time the *amrit* is made and each time the *havan* is performed. It is also prepared for each time the *bhog* of each *pāth* takes place.

Nāmdhāri Weddings

Nāmdhāri weddings illustrate well the problems raised by the issue of attempting uniformity with regard to praxis among all Sikhs. Nāmdhāris continue to take the *pheras* around the sacred fire, because of their emphasis on following traditions from the inception of the Sikh faith. They believe that since the Gurūs had married according to the Hindu custom, then so should they. Again, there is an attempt to revert to original customs. Nevertheless, as in general Sikh practice, four *pheras* take place, one to each of the *lāvān* hymns composed by Gurū Rāmdās. The *lāvān* hymn was composed by Gurū Rāmdās for his own daughter's wedding. It consists of four stanzas, thus a *phera* is taken at the completion of each stanza. The couple take *amrit* prior to the commencement of the ceremony. Both the bride and groom wear simple white clothes, and the bride wears no jewellery – again a unique practice among the Nāmdhāris.

The wedding is a very simple and inexpensive affair. The general Sikh social custom of a reception after the wedding is not practised among the Nāmdhāris. No reception at all takes place and, furthermore, no dowry is given. I was told that those who do hold a reception or give or take dowry are shunned by the

Nāmdhāri community. In their ideal of inexpensive marriages, the practice of mass weddings is also common among the Kūkās. These usually take place in the presence of Gurū Jagjīt Singh. Large numbers of Nāmdhāri couples, all dressed in white, walk around a huge ceremonial fire, four times.

A unique practice among the Nāmdhāris is that of mixed-*zāt* marriages. However, of major importance, is that the couple be followers of the Nāmdhāri tradition. Thus, a Nāmdhāri *jaṭ* can marry a Nāmdhāri *rāmgarhīā*, and so on. Whether marriages are actually conducted between higher *zats* with Scheduled Classes is a sensitive issue. Nāmdhāris are hesitant to openly admit the fact that marriages between the higher *zāts* with the Scheduled Classes do *not* take place. But of major consideration here is the issue that inter-caste marriages may actually be *consciously* performed. In other words, they are purposely adopted to convey the fact that the Nāmdhāris are stringent followers of Gurū Nānak, who openly criticized the caste system – another Nāmdhāri attempt to be as traditional as possible. Nevertheless, the Sikh Gurūs themselves, although denouncing caste prejudices, married within their *zāt*, the marriages of their offspring were also arranged with *khatrīs*. But it would appear that the Nāmdhāris are following the teachings of the Gurūs with regard to equality more literally than Sikhs in general and more fervently than the Gurūs themselves. On the one hand, the Nāmdhāris are following the teachings of the Gurūs that deride caste, but on the other they are not conforming to the practice of the Sikh Gurūs with regard to endogamy.

The Nāmdhāri wedding, which is called the *Anand* Marriage, was instituted by Gurū Rām Singh. Sikh weddings of the time involved parents of the bride being overburdened with costs for her dowry: a major reason for female infanticide among Indians generally. Thus, in his endeavour to stop female infanticide, and to prevent the bride's family having to pawn its goods to the rich landlords, Gurū Rām Singh introduced simple and inexpensive weddings for the Kūkās.⁷⁴ In aiming to conduct the wedding simply, there are no other customs such as the *milnī*, which takes place before the wedding ceremony in Sikh weddings generally. Instead, the bride will give the groom a simple white *mālā*. Neither is the custom of *kurmai* adhered to by Kūkās: this is the custom of the bride's family giving gifts, often expensive ones such as gold, to the groom. The Nāmdhāri groom will not wear the *pujāmā*. Instead he wears the *kacchā*, which is usually covered with the long tunic top. *Havan* is again performed before the commencement of the ceremony in order to cleanse the minds of the couple.

Thus, it is clear that, with regard to the wedding ceremony, the Nāmdhāris exhibit separatist criteria. Paradoxically, however, the emphasis placed on both bride and groom to take *amrit* prior to the ceremony sheds a strong *Khālsā* overtone on the ritual. Importantly nevertheless, it is the *lāvān* hymn that is recited and not any non-Sikh literature, these factors, therefore, are indicators that promote Sikh conformity.

Festivals

The main festivals celebrated by Sikhs in general are also celebrated by the Nāmdhāris. The most obvious one not celebrated, however, by Nāmdhāris, is the *gurgaddī* of the *Ādi Granth*. In addition to the usual Sikh celebrations, the Nāmdhāris have extra festivals or commemorations related to the historical events and persons of their particular group.

The festival of *holā mohallā*, the spring festival celebrated by all Sikhs, is given the additional name of *trivenī* among Nāmdhāris. As the term *trivenī* indicates, it is celebrated for three reasons, the actual *holā mohallā* celebration, as well as the birthdays of Gurū Bālak Singh, and that of Gurū Partāp Singh.⁷⁵ In this respect the Nāmdhāris have a number of unique celebrations, a fine example of their distinctiveness from the general *Panth*. The celebration of *trivenī* was instituted by the present Nāmdhāri Gurū. Celebrations begin with the *havan* ceremony, as is common to all joyous occasions. The whole day's events are focused on the performance of *kīrtan*. A special lecture is also given to inform the *saṅgat* of the reasons behind celebrating *holā mohallā*. Although *holā mohallā* has its origin in the Hindu festival of *holī*, it has been modified for the Sikh *Panth*. Gurū Gobind Singh did not favour the throwing of coloured water, as is practised on *holī*, neither did he support the practice of drinking *bhang*, an intoxicating liquid, by the *holī* participants. He therefore gave *holī* a new meaning, it was now to colour the mind and heart brightly towards God. Furthermore, Gurū Rām Singh emphasized the performance of *nām simran* during *holā mohallā*.

Baisākhī for the Nāmdhāris takes on a double celebration. As well as celebrating the birth of the *Khālsā* by Gurū Gobind Singh in 1699, Nāmdhāris also celebrate the birth of the *Sant Khālsā* by Gurū Rām Singh in 1857. The celebration of the formation of the *Sant Khālsā* as the 'second birth of the *Khālsā*' is outrightly rejected by Sikhs as a whole.

Places of Worship

The Nāmdhāri place of worship is not called a *gurdwārā*, but is referred to as a Nāmdhāri *saṅgat*. Occasionally, it is also referred to as a *dharamśālā*, a centre for correct living or practising of religion. The abstinence from using the term *gurdwārā* is probably due to the fact that in Sikhism generally, wherever a copy of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is placed, that place becomes a *gurdwārā*. However, since Nāmdhāris do not regard the *Ādi Granth* as Gurū, and since the present Gurū is not always present at the centre, it is thus not given the term *gurdwārā*.

The term *dharamśālā* was used in the early Sikh community to refer to a place where Sikhs would gather to sing praises of God. The importance of the *dharamśālā* is further highlighted since it 'was one of the features which conferred a distinctive identity on the Nanak-panth'.⁷⁶ Thus, the Nāmdhāris, in

attempting to preserve the nature and beliefs of the original Nānak community, prefer to retain the term *dharamsālā* rather than *gurdwārā*.

Another distinct feature of the place of worship is that, instead of a saffron *nisān sāhib* being present outside the building, the Nāmdhāri centre has a white, triangular *nisān sāhib*. This is, of course, reminiscent of the white flag hoisted by Gurū Rām Singh on the formation of the *Sant Khālsā* in 1857. Today the white *nisān sāhib* is unique to the Nāmdhāris. They retain the belief that the *nisān sāhib*, originally introduced by Gurū Angad, was white, and displayed the emblem of *Ik-Onkār*. Thus the white *nisān sāhib* was totally void of any militant aspect. It was Gurū Hargobind who changed the colour to saffron, symbolizing the mustard flower that is used to represent the *shahīdī*, martyr, readiness of followers. The emblem of *Ik-Onkār* remained until it was replaced by the *Khaṇḍā* after the creation of the *Khālsā* by Gurū Gobind Singh.

Retention of the white *nisān sāhib* clearly illustrates the Nāmdhāris' adherence to traditional practices. Nāmdhāris believe that the white *nisān sāhib* is symbolic of the *pīrī* concept; while the saffron *nisān sāhib* symbolizes the *mīrī* concept. So, does this mean that, in retaining the colour white, the Nāmdhāris are rejecting Gurū Hargobind's concept of temporal authority? It would seem unlikely for the Nāmdhāris to deny the *mīrī-pīrī* concept since it was practised by the sixth to the tenth Sikh Gurūs. In the context of the *deh-dhārī* Gurū, therefore, they are in fact, carrying the *mīrī-pīrī* concept *further* by having both scripture and a living Gurū. I would think that the white colour is retained because it portrays, more closely, their pacifist outlook on religion, and because, as already mentioned, the original *nisān sāhib* was white in colour. Nevertheless, in view of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, a Sikh place of worship must have either a saffron or dark-blue *nisān sāhib*⁷⁷ to distinguish it from other buildings. By purposely exhibiting the white *nisān sāhib*, the Nāmdhāris are accentuating their separateness from the overall *Panth*. If this is the case, then, again, they are further diversifying from the notion of a uniform Sikh identity.

The interior of the Nāmdhāri place of worship is replete with pictures of the Nāmdhāri Gurūs and scenes of Nāmdhāri history. This illustrates well the *difference* between Nāmdhāris and non-Nāmdhāri Sikhs. Nevertheless, pictures of the Sikh Gurūs are also present. The *Ādi Granth* is not housed in the same manner as it is in Sikh *gurdwārās* generally, the main focus is, instead, a huge picture of the present Gurū. Above his picture, attached to the ceiling, is the *chatrī*, a symbol of respect, and at his feet is placed a white sheet. It is at this spot, called the *singhāsan*, that is, at the feet of the Gurū's picture, that followers perform *maṭāh tekṇā* 'bowing', this is done *before* bowing to the *Ādi Granth*. When the present Gurū visits the place of worship, it is at the *singhāsan* that he will sit. Thus, the eminent position of the living Gurū is stressed over and above the *Ādi Granth*: again an overt criterion that inhibits true Sikh identity. A *giānī* is usually present to read from the *Ādi Granth*: respect is always shown to it. The *Dasam Granth*, as previously indicated, is also given equal importance

among the Nāmdhāris since it, too, is scripture. Furthermore, it could be suggested that since Gurū Rām Singh is regarded as a reincarnation of the tenth Gurū – the composer of the *Dasam Granth* – respect is shown for what Gurū Rām Singh, as Gurū Gobind Singh, had composed in an earlier lifetime. It is stressed that the Nāmdhāri Gurū is never worshipped: in the same way as Sikhs in general show respect for the Gurūs and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* so, too, Nāmdhāri Sikhs show respect to, but not worship of, their living Gurū.

Worship

Although in essence, worship is quite similar to that of general *gurdwārās*, there are a number of differences among Nāmdhāris. One is that the congregation stands every time *kaṛāh prasād* is brought into the hall. *Kaṛāh prasād* is placed on the side of the *Ādi Granth*, as it is in *gurdwārās*. The singers and *rāgīs* play an important role due to the emphasis on *kīrtan* among the Nāmdhāris. Music is continuous through the service, unless a lecture or speech is given.

Another distinct feature of Nāmdhāri worship is their unique pattern of the recital of *ardās*. A full translation of the Nāmdhāri *ardās* can be found in McLeod's *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*.⁷⁸ The major differences between the *ardās* of Sikhs in general and Nāmdhāris are:

- Nāmdhāri *ardās*, does not contain the words: *Gurū Maniyo Granth*.
- The names of Gurū Bālak Singh and the Nāmdhāri Gurūs are also added to the Nāmdhāri *ardās*, as well as reference to the Kūkā martyrs who were blown up by canons.
- The name of the present Gurū, Jagjīt Singh is not recited during *ardās* if he is present at the particular place of worship.⁷⁹

Frequently, grief is shown for the Kūkās' separation from Gurū Rām Singh, whom, as illustrated above, they believe is yet alive. A poem known as the Kūkā *Barā Māh* is sung. Part of the Kūkā *Barā Māh* reads as follows:

There is no comfort without the Sat Guru; all the Singhs are grieved. The Singhs do not enjoy their sleep, and keep awake all night in anxiety. They do not find any relish in their food. Grief for the separation of the Guru is eating up their vitals. Who will cause the Guru to meet me, so that I may make offerings to him? I am sacrificed to the Guru. O Chanda Singh! the Guru went to Burma.⁸⁰

Pāths are often held for the much-awaited return of Gurū Rām Singh.

Practices of the Nāmdhāris present the perplexities associated in issues relating to Sikh identity. Their utmost insistence placed on the *Khālsā* form is in line with the *Khālsā* Sikh identity, and although the Nāmdhāris deviate from many accepted Sikh practices, in actual fact they also conform to many others. These are, thus, criteria that both inhibit and strengthen the Sikh identity of the

Nāmdhāris. What is clear is that the efforts towards tradition, in terms of religious practice, has caused the separatist identity of the Nāmdhāris. Ultimately, they are *within* the *Panth* due to stringent adherence of the *Khālsā*, but they are *different* Sikhs – those who will never be defined by one uniform definition of Sikh identity.

The position of the Nāmdhāris is rather like that of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā where, as seen in [Chapter Two](#), ultra-*Khālsā* stringency in fact results in separatism from Sikhs of the general *Panth*. Guidelines for correct Sikh practice are contained in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, however, the Nāmdhāris do not accept its authority – they have their own *Rehat Maryādā*. This fact illustrates the complexities of one uniform definition of Sikh identity. The practice of *not* acknowledging the *Ādi Granth* as eternal Gurū, however, is a major consideration for a separate affiliation of the Nāmdhāris. The central focus in general *gurdwārās* is the *pālṁ* housing the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. In Nāmdhāri centres however, the central focus is the *singhāsān* where Gurū Jagjīt Singh will sit on his visits to the particular centre. This accentuates deviance from accepted Sikh belief and practice.

The Position of the Nāmdhāris Within the Panth

The Nāmdhāris are regarded as heretical and non-Sikh by a significant number of Sikhs of the general *Panth*. This is because the Nāmdhāris call their leaders by the term ‘Gurū’, instead of *Sant* or *Bābā*. Their strict adherence to the *Khālsā* tradition, which is illustrated by the fact of the majority, if not all, followers being *amritdhārī*, is a criterion nevertheless that would not inhibit the Nāmdhāris’ conformity to uniform Sikh identity. However, their rejection of the *Ādi Granth* as the eternal Gurū of the Sikhs, is a significant reason that inhibits the Sikh identity of the Nāmdhāris.

In accordance with the definition of a Sikh as stated in the *Gurdwārās Act* 1971, a Sikh is to declare his or her identity by professing the following words:

I solemnly affirm that I am a Keshdhari (*sic*) Sikh, that I believe in and follow the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Ten Gurus only, and that I have no other religion.⁸¹

Bearing in mind the above declaration, the Nāmdhāris are an enigma in terms of their Sikh affiliation. Their *outward* conformity to a corporate Sikh identity is clear, and is sufficient for the group to be included *within* the *Panth*. However, they deviate *radically* from what must surely be regarded as one of the basic and foundational tenets of Sikh belief. In some ways this might suggest the pre-eminence of outward conformity – the necessity of being *amritdhārī*, *kesdhārī* and observance of the Five Ks.

Furthermore, the Nāmdhāris' contribution towards Indian Independence in terms of their historical militant involvement on behalf of all Sikhs, bears testimony to their Sikh alliance. The Nāmdhāris were among the first to be involved in the Independence struggle. Then, too, the Kūkās stressed the *Khālsā* form during the period in which the *Panth* was becoming increasingly lapsed. Thus a paradox exists between a non-*Khālsā* continuing of human Gurūs versus their stringent observation of the *Khālsā* conduct. And, furthermore, many beliefs of the Nāmdhāris are in accordance with the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* which nowhere mentions that there should be only ten human Gurūs. However, the Nāmdhāri emphasis on practising traditions that have existed in the earliest phases of Sikhism differentiates them from other Sikhs. This illustrates well the diversity of the Sikh *Panth* and, furthermore, anomalies associated with a uniform definition of Sikh identity.

In their opinion, the fact that they have a line of human successors, including a present Gurū, *does not* exclude the Nāmdhāris from the fold of the *Khālsā*. Thus, the tradition of the *Ādi Granth* alongside a human Gurū has been carried on from the time of the compiler of the *Ādi Granth*, Gurū Arjan. But there is deviance, too, in that many reforms made by the Singh Sabhā and *Tat Khālsā* leaders are not adhered to by the Nāmdhāris. The *anand karāj* ceremony and the performance of *havan* among the Kūkās remain exclusive to their practices. In retaining more distinctive practices, including the style of the turban, the Nāmdhāris continuously claim that they are continuing the *maryādā* of the Sikh faith as it was from the inception of Sikhism. In this respect they fully justify their claims to a Sikh orientation, but the result is a differentiation *within* the *Panth*. Thus, I believe the attempt to be wholly traditional, taking their beliefs right back to the original Nānak community and tends to overshadow the Nāmdhāris as a deviant group, even if their allegiance to the *Khālsā* places them within the *Panth*.

Their tradition of a living Gurū in preference to the *Ādi Granth*, causes them to have their own centres of worship, resulting in less contact with the general *Panth*. Again, this creates separate groups within the *Panth* and threatens a corporate and uniform definition of *all* Sikhs.

Further issues raised in respect to criteria related to the issue of Sikh identity are examined by looking at lower *zāt* conversions to the Sikh faith. In the following chapter I look at the Ravidāsīs, in order to assess the implications of *zāt* issues and the light they shed on indicators that challenge a uniform Sikh identity.

Notes

¹ Kūkās is the plural, the singular is Kūkā. The number of Nāmdhāri followers is difficult to estimate. Nāmdhāris themselves suggest there are two and a half million worldwide.

² This is a *zāt* of merchants, found in both the Hindu and Sikh faiths.

³ Exactly what proportion is made up of the Scheduled Classes is uncertain.

⁴ Teja Singh is renowned as a great scholar and was also a member of the *Tat Khālsā*.

⁵ McLeod, W.H. (1997) *Sikhism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 191–2.

⁶ Macauliffe, M.A. (1990 rp of 1909 edn) *The Sikh Religion: Vol 5*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 245.

⁷ Ibid., p. 246.

⁸ Nevertheless, justification from the Nāmdhārī point of view in support of Gurū Gobind's physical existence after his alleged death is presented, contentiously, in their opinion that Gurū Gobind Singh helped various individuals to escape from the fort at Poona-Sitara. This is a task they believe must insinuate the Gurū's *bodily* presence. See Namdhari, Dalip Singh (1977) *Gursikhi Vichardhara*, Ludhiana: Namdhari Vidhiak Jatha, p. 73.

⁹ See Singh, Khushwant (1966) *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 127.

¹⁰ See Singh, Harbans (1994) *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 192.

¹¹ See Singh, Nihal ((1966) *Enlighteners*, Sri Jiwan Nager: Namdhari Sahit Prakashan, p. 58.

¹² See Singh, Gurmit, (1978) *Sant Khalsa*, Sirsa: Usha Institute of Religious Studies, p. 27.

¹³ McLeod, W.H. (1984) *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 128.

¹⁴ This is recited at the end of general *gurdwārā* services. Therefore, the Nāmdhārī *ardās* differs slightly from the Sikh *ardās* due to the former not reciting the *Granth* as Gurū. Additionally, they add the names of Bālāk Singh and the Nāmdhārī Gurūs to the list of ten Gurūs who are remembered during *ardās*. Jagjit Singh, the present leader's name, is not recited if he is present at the place of worship.

¹⁵ See Singh, Gurmit, *Sant Khalsa*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Gursikhi Vichardhara*, p. 75.

¹⁷ Sikhs at large believe that after 1708, that is, the date of Gurū Gobind's death according to non-Nāmdhārī Sikhs, eternal gurūship was vested in the *Gurū Granth Sahib*, as it was now to be referred to. Because the line of human Gurūs was to come to an end, temporal authority was invested in the whole *Panth*.

¹⁸ In the majority of literature regarding the Nāmdhāris, it is found that, although non-Nāmdhāris such as Harbans Singh refer to Bālāk Singh as the founder (Singh, H., *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, p. 192), the majority of Nāmdhāris will refer to Rām Singh as the founder. The Nāmdhāris view Bālāk Singh as an intermediary between the tenth and twelfth Gurūs.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Harbans Singh has referred to Bālāk Singh as Bhāī rather than as Gurū, and in the same book he also refers to Rām Singh as *Bābā* (ibid., p. 192). He probably wishes to distinguish the Nāmdhārī Gurūs from the ten Sikh Gurūs, who, according to him, are alone worthy of the title of 'Gurū'.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

²¹ See Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, p. 128.

²² Bali, Y. and Bali, K. (1995) *Warriors in White*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, p. 32.

²³ According to McLeod, the term *Jagīāsī* refers to "worshipper", from *jagya* or *yagya*, "sacrifice", "offering". In some references the title used is *Abhiasi* (*abhiasi*, "student", "one who meditates or devoutly repeats a sacred *mantra*", from *abhiyas*, "study, meditation, repetition"): McLeod, W.H. 'The Kukas: A Millenarian Sect of the Punjab' in Wood, G.A. and O'Connor, P.S. (eds) (1973) *W.P. Morrell: A Tribute*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, p. 272, endnote 1.

²⁴ Singh, N. and Singh, K. (1989) *Rebels Against the British Rule: Guru Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, p. 1.

²⁵ The present Nāmdhārī Gurū is married to a Nāmdhārī of the *jaṭ zāt*.

²⁶ Singh, Gurmit, *Sant Khalsa*, p. ii.

²⁷ See Ahluwalia, M.M. (1965) *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, p. 55.

²⁸ Singh, Harbans, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, p. 192. The belief that Gurū Rām Singh met Gurū Bālāk Singh while in the army is also supported by Fauja Singh Bajwa, who goes a step further in stating that the meeting took place in 1841 in Hazro, whilst Rām Singh was on his way to Peshawar; Bajwa further adds that Rām Singh ‘immediately fell under his [Bālāk Singh’s] spell’ (see Bajwa, F.S. (1965) *Kuka Movement*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 6).

²⁹ Giani, G.S. (1986) *Leaflet: Main Travels of Sat Guru Ram Singh Ji*, Uttar Pradesh: Namdhari Darbar.

³⁰ Nāmdhāris themselves believe that Gurū Rām Singh’s first encounter with Gurū Bālāk Singh occurred at Hazro where, immediately, Gurū Bālāk Singh recognized Rām Singh as the reincarnation of Gurū Gobind Singh. Bālāk Singh placed five coins and a coconut in front of Rām Singh and thus passed gurūship to him. (Kaur, Beant [1999] *The Namdhari Sikhs*, Forest Gate, London: Namdhari Sikhs Historical Museum, pp. 19–20).

³¹ Bali and Bali, *Warriors in White*, p. 16.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³³ The term ‘Kūkā’ itself was to herald the community as the pioneers in the struggle for independence; their *kūk*, ‘cry or call for freedom’, was against British power in India (see *ibid.*, p. 8). Bajwa gives a very detailed account of the events that took place on the day of the creation of the *Sant Khālsā*, see Bajwa, *Kuka Movement*, chapter 3.

³⁴ Bali and Bali, *Warriors in White*, p. 20.

³⁵ Samat 1914 corresponds to 1857 CE; the Indian calendar (Samat) is 57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar.

³⁶ Jeet, S.S. (undated) *Leaflet: Brief Remarks about Namdhari Sikhs*, London: Namdhari Sikh Sangat UK.

³⁷ Bali and Bali, *Warriors in White*, p. 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁹ Singh, Gurmit, *Sant Khalsa*, p. iii.

⁴⁰ Singh, N. and Singh, K. *Rebels Against the British Rule: Guru Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs*, p. xiii.

⁴¹ See Lal, Shiv (1994) *Dateline Punjab – Lifeline Sikhs*, New Delhi: Election Archives, p. 77.

⁴² Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, p. 129.

⁴³ Singh, N. and Singh, K. *Rebels Against the British Rule: Guru Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs*, pp. 11–12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Orders/instructions.

⁴⁷ Bali and Bali, *Warriors in White*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵² Ahluwalia, *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, p. 171.

⁵³ Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs: Vol 2*, p. 134.

⁵⁴ Lal, *Dateline Punjab – Lifeline Sikhs*, p. 77.

⁵⁵ His other son is Bīr Singh.

⁵⁶ *Asian Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 15, January 1998.

⁵⁷ Singh, G., *Sant Khalsa*, p. 42.

⁵⁸ Gurūdev Sharan in *Souvenir for the Satguru Partap Singh Music Festival*, 31st March and 1st April 1996 at Brent Town Hall, London: Namdhari Sikh Heritage Society, (no page numbers).

⁵⁹ For a detailed look at the main philosophies in Sikhism, see: Cole, W.O. and Sambhi, P.S. (1998 2nd fully revised edn, first published 1978) *The Sikhs*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, chapter 5; and McLeod, W.H. (1996 rp of 1968 edn) *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, chapter 5.

⁶⁰ Singh, Manmohan, (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, pp. 4590–91.

⁶¹ The term *chelā* can also be used for a disciple; however, *śiṣyaḥ* is frequently used by the Kūkas.

⁶² *Gursikhi Vichardhara*, p. 61.

⁶³ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, pp. 4479–80.

⁶⁴ The devotee is never to utter this *gurmantar* loudly, nor tell it to anyone, because of its very holy significance.

⁶⁵ *Gursikhi Vichardhara*, p. 70.

⁶⁶ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, pp. 3514–16.

⁶⁷ Ahluwalia, *Freedom Struggle in India*, p. 182. A full, detailed list of these *sakhīs* can be found in Ahluwalia, *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, chapter 16.

⁶⁸ Ahluwalia, *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, p. 185.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ A full, translated version of the Nāmdhāri *Rehat Maryādā* can be found in McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, pp. 129–30.

⁷¹ Lal, *Dateline Punjab – Lifeline Sikhs*, p. 79.

⁷² *Havan* by the Nāmdhāris should be performed in the following manner: ‘When a *jag* (*yajna*) is to be performed purify the place where it is to be held (the *jag* square) by plastering it. Bring earthen vessels which have not previously been used and wash your feet before entering the *jag* square. There perform the *havan*, or *hom* (ritual fire ceremony). Use wood from either the *patas* or the *ber* tree. Do not [fan the fire by] blowing it with human breath. During the course of the ritual fire service (five officiants) should read the following from copies of the scriptures: *Chaupai*, *Japji*, *Jap*, *Chandi Charitra* and *Akal Ustat*. A sixth officiant should meanwhile pour incense (on the fire) and a seventh should (intermittently) sprinkle a few drops of water on it’ (McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, p. 130).

⁷³ *Gursikhi Vichardhara*, p. 83.

⁷⁴ Gurū Rām Singh’s rationale in instituting the *Anand* Marriage has been clearly summarized by Ahluwalia, *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, pp. 49–50.

⁷⁵ Although Gurū Partāp Singh’s birthday actually occurs a few days later, it is celebrated on *holā mohallā*.

⁷⁶ McLeod, *Sikhism*, p. 8.

⁷⁷ *Rehat Maryada* (1978) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 8.

⁷⁸ McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, pp. 130–31.

⁷⁹ Although his name is not recited when he is present at the centre, it is however, recited when he is absent from the particular centre.

⁸⁰ Ahluwalia, *Kukas: The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, p. 164. A longer translation of the Kūkā *Barā Māh* can be found in Ahluwalia, *ibid.*, pp. 160–68.

⁸¹ *Amrtisar Rehat Maryada*, p. 27.

Chapter 4

Ravidāsīs

Low-caste conversions to Sikhism shed an interesting light on the issue of whether all who have taken initiation are accepted equally as Sikhs. The egalitarian teachings of Sikhism have important implications when discussing Sikh identity. The Ravidāsīs, who were formerly members of the Scheduled Classes, were at one time referred to as the Untouchables, that is, members of the lowest strata of Indian society. The new term of Scheduled Classes was originally coined by the British during the census of 1931. According to them, this term implied no connotations of the concepts attached to untouchability – primarily that of pollution. In addition, the members of the lower classes found the term ‘Scheduled Classes’ less patronizing than the term *harijans* (children of God) which was applied by Mahatma Gandhi in his attempt to improve the social conditions of the lower classes.

The Ravidāsīs are a Punjabi community who take their name from allegiance to a historical figure, commonly referred to as Ravidās, who is regarded as Gurū by his followers. It is to him that they trace their origin, an important factor since it is one that makes the Ravidāsī community a caste-based institution. There is no evidence to suggest that there was a following of Gurū Ravidās during his lifetime. The wider recognition of Ravidās as a Gurū, therefore, can be attributed to the fruition of the efforts of the founders of the *Ad Dharm*, who were themselves from the Scheduled Classes.¹ The Scheduled Classes had originally converted in mass numbers to the Sikh faith in the hope of achieving equality. However, they became Ravidāsīs as a result of the continued prejudice of higher *zāt* Sikhs. Whereas the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā (as seen in [Chapter Two](#)) and the Nāmdhāris (as seen in [Chapter Three](#)) have overt connections with the general *Panth*, the Ravidāsīs today have no real concern to be associated with the *Panth* or, indeed, with Sikhism as a whole. Importantly, although originally many of the Scheduled Classes had converted in masses to the Sikh faith, today the Ravidāsīs exist as a challenge to traditional Sikh identity. Moreover, the Ravidāsīs stand as an outstanding example of the fact that caste identity is a major criterion of Sikh identity itself.

Although the Ravidāsīs will refer to Ravidās as their Gurū, hence illustrating the extent of devotion to him, Sikhs in general will refer to Ravidās as a *bhaktā*, a devotee and *not* a Gurū. The term *bhaktā* indicates an individual who is highly devoted to a personal God, and one who seeks to surrender the self to God in total loving-devotion. For the majority of Sikhs, with the exception of groups such as the Nāmdhāris, the term Gurū is utilized for the ten Sikh Gurūs and the

Gurū Granth Sāhib alone. Traditionally, being members of the Scheduled Classes, the Ravidāsīs are counted among the downtrodden and oppressed people of India: their traditional occupation involves working with the highly polluted material of leather, hence the term *chamār*, which is translated as 'leather worker'. The term is also traced to *charam-kara*, also meaning leather-worker.² The Ravidāsīs, like the Vālmikis (who are discussed in [Chapter Five](#)), dislike being referred to as *chamārs* and *chūhrās* respectively. They find the terms offensive. Therefore, I will attempt to use the terms as little as possible; my usage of the terms is not intended to patronize the communities in any way. Living in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries CE, Gurū Ravidās was both a social reformer and a spiritual teacher, who, like Gurū Nānak, probably belonged to the Northern *Sant* tradition. Highly significant is that Ravidās himself belonged to the *chamār zāt*: hence his popularity among his followers. The association between the followers of Gurū Ravidās and Sikhism is evidenced by the fact that 41 hymns composed by Ravidās are contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Thus the Ravidāsī community utilize the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* as its base for religious teachings; interestingly, the Ravidāsīs preferably refer to the scripture as *Ādī Granth*, rather than *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. It is emphasized that the scripture is used primarily for the 41 hymns of Ravidās contained within it. Importantly, the remainder of the scripture does not have any real significance for the Ravidāsīs. A project is underway in India whereby the hymns of Ravidās found in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and elsewhere are in the process of being gathered into one composite volume. Once this has been achieved, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* will no longer be utilized in Ravidāsī places of worship.

Gurū Ravidās believed in the freedom of all humankind and the irrelevance of caste distinctions. His spirituality is continually emphasized by his followers:

Guru Ji succeeded in his aims when the *Brahmins* fell upon his feet after watching his miracles. Even kings and queens became his followers.³

The Life Details of Gurū Ravidās

Although a point of departure from the topic of Sikh identity, details regarding Ravidās will facilitate clarification of the attraction he had for his community of followers and the particular outcome of such attraction in the self-identity of this group. According to tradition and popular belief, Ravidās was born in Benares. The *Raidās Ji Kī Bāñī aur Jīvan Charitra* mentions Kashī as his birthplace,⁴ this is of course the present-day Benares. Although Ravidās may have been born around the Benares area, he himself never actually mentions this. Therefore his birthplace varies, according to which author is quoting it.⁵

One thing for certain is that Gurū Ravidās was born to *chamār* parents; he, himself, makes many references to his *zāt*.

My caste is low, my lineage is low and mean is my birth . . .

I, a shoe-mender, know not how to mend. But people get their shoes repaired by me. (AG 659).⁶

My caste is low, my lineage (pedigree) is low and low is my birth.

I have not performed the service of the Sovereign Lord. Says Ravidas, the cobbler. (AG 486).⁷

Noticeably, Ravidās' *bāṇī* in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is contained as *bhagat bāṇī*: the hymns of the low-caste saints. Gurū Arjan's inclusion of the *bhagat bāṇī* into the *Ādi Granth* is, therefore, highly indicative of the egalitarian faith of Sikhism. The compositions of low-caste saints were included alongside those of the Sikh Gurūs.

The matter concerning the original collection of hymns of low-caste saints, prior to their inclusion into the *Ādi Granth* by the fifth Sikh Gurū in 1604–05 CE, is one of dispute among Sikh scholars. Scholars generally believe that the hymns were collected either by Gurū Nānak or by the third Sikh Gurū, Amardās (1552–74 CE). Traditional belief, however, is that the hymns of Ravidās were being sung by Mardānā. The hymns were likely to have been Gurū Nānak's collection since it was he who emphatically taught of the irrelevance of caste distinctions. By collecting the hymns of low-caste *bhagats*, Gurū Nānak would have been putting his theory into practice. In any case, Gurū Amardās would have obtained the hymns from a previous collector, since his dates make it impossible for him to have ever met Ravidās. According to Darshan Singh 'the Compositions of the *bhaktas*, were definitely known to Guru Nanak'⁸ thus supporting the point that they must, indeed, have been collected by Gurū Nānak and written into his *pothī*. However, this statement is challenged by McLeod who suggests that the *bhagat bāṇī* was among the collection of hymns of Gurū Amardās due to their similarity with his own ideas.⁹

Contrary to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the *Raidās Jī Kī Bāṇī aur Jīvan Charitra* states that Ravidās in his previous life was a *brāhmin*.¹⁰ The account states that Ravidās was initiated by Ramananda, and honoured and served him as his gurū. One particular day Ravidās had brought food from a *bāṇīyā* (*zāt* of business people) who associated with *chamārs* thus, the food that the *bāṇīyā* sold, was considered to be polluted. Ramanada, on finding out that the food was from the *bāṇīyā*, became outraged and cursed Ravidās that he be reborn as a *chamār*. Hence, in his next life, Ravidās was born to *chamār* parents.¹¹ What is clear is that there has often been a tendency for the higher-class Hindus to link Ravidās with the *brāhmin* class of Hindu society; this, in their opinion, is to make him socially acceptable. Their belief is that Ravidās was a *brāhmin* in his previous life and was reborn only to help the lower classes. I must emphasize that Ravidās in his hymns makes no such references to a *brāhmanical* heritage: he is proud of his low caste and he himself confirms his social position (AG 659).

The period of Indian history into which Ravidās was born is very significant in the context of the plight of the lower castes, who were, at this time, the victims of great oppression at the hands of the higher classes. Only the higher classes had the privilege of worshipping God by orthodox means. Ravidās raised his voice against the oppression of his caste members and sought equality and the universal brotherhood of humankind.

The religious charisma of Ravidās caused many of the lower castes to believe in him, much to the dismay of the *brāhmins*, who could not accommodate the attitudes towards equality emerging in the psyche of the lower castes. The particular disgust of the *brāhmins* arose when they witnessed followers of Ravidās accepting him as their leader through the initiation ceremony of *charanamrit*;¹² this act involved intense *bhaktī* on behalf of the disciple. To the *brāhmins* however, it involved the acquisition of utmost pollution. This period of Ravidās's life reflects *sadhna* 'spiritual endeavors', during which Ravidās proclaimed the right to be able to worship God: it was a time when the *brāhmins* set out to make his life uncomfortable. But a second period involved Ravidās having attained spiritual realization and hence being renowned as a great saint: it is during this latter period, as previously indicated, that *brāhmins*, too, came to pay their respects to Ravidās.¹³ Thus, the irrelevance of caste distinctions was highlighted by the fact that Ravidās was being venerated by higher-caste men due to his knowledge about God; this is the prevalent belief among his followers, as illustrated by Bharti and Mal:

People hate my caste because the people of my caste are involved in leather work. But elite of high caste people are worshipping me as I am also a low caste man and working as a shoe mender, so Oh God! this I believe is the result of your company.¹⁴

There is no reference to any particular *gurū* as the source of Ravidās's enlightenment in his *bāṇī*, although it has been popularly claimed that the *gurū* of Ravidās was Ramananda. Therefore, the religious spirit was present within *Gurū Ravidās* from a very early age, and it is his popularity among the people around Benares that led to his wider recognition.

There is much uncertainty regarding the dates of Ravidās, although agreement has not been established, most suggest dates from 1414 CE to 1540 CE.¹⁵ The fact that there are a variety of dates for the birth and/or death of Ravidās, and that they are frequently being changed, is due to an attempt to associate him with prominent figures of the past such as *Gurū Nānak*, Ramananda,¹⁶ Kabīr,¹⁷ Mīrābai,¹⁸ and other great saintly individuals.¹⁹

According to the *Miharbān Janamsākhī*, Ravidās, along with other *Sants*, came to visit *Gurū Nānak*.²⁰ Historically this may be correct since both men may have been contemporaries. This could probably be the source of *Gurū Nānak*'s awareness of Ravidās's hymns since, prior to their inclusion in the *Adi Granth* by *Gurū Arjan*, there is a belief that they were often sung by Mardānā.²¹

What this evidence tentatively suggests, then, is that Ravidās had some links with the founder of Sikhism from the start and, certainly, a measure of commonality of thought. The congruity of thought between the two men, I believe, is due to their *Sant* heritage.

I suggest the dates of Ravidās to be somewhere between 1414–1540 CE, since this would have brought him into contact with Gurū Nānak, who thus became aware of Ravidās's hymns. It is, indeed, these dates that the majority of followers associate with Ravidās, hence believing him to have lived until the ripe old age of 126 years.²² On the other hand, however, it would have been highly unlikely for Ravidās, as a fifteenth century Untouchable, to have lived to such an age.

With regard to the death of Ravidās, the *Raidas Ji Ki Bāṇī aur Jivan Charitra* states that he died at the age of 120 years old; taking his *bāṇī* with him he vanished and became eternal.²³ Thus, to devotees, this accounts for the fact that there is no reliable, original *bāṇī* of Gurū Ravidās.

Caste Among Sikhs

The presence of *zāt* within the *Panth* as a whole is a highly sensitive issue. Many Sikhs outrightly reject any claims that Sikhism has retained the *zāt* notion from its Hindu past. Importantly, *gurbāṇī* strongly denounces *zāt* discrimination. The developing faith of Sikhism was particularly attractive to the lower *zāts* in the hope that they would achieve equality with other Sikhs, and would, therefore, erase the stigma of untouchability associated with their class. This was to be expected in view of the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs which accentuated the irrelevance of *zāt* distinctions. Importantly, the Sikh Gurūs were opposed to beliefs concerning ritual purity and pollution. The institution of the *laṅgar* in all *gurdwārās* promotes the egalitarian ideal and highlights the Gurūs' disregard for notions of pollution. Members of the congregation, and all who visit the *gurdwārā*, eat and sit together, hence rejecting Hindu laws of prescribed distances between higher and lower *zāts*. The institution of the *laṅgar* opposes Hindu views that food is considered highly contaminated if it comes into contact with a low-caste person. Higher class Hindus can accept *kacchā* (raw, uncooked food) but are required to cook it themselves. However, *pakkā* (cooked food) is not accepted by higher classes, due to its polluting nature. Significantly, Sikhism, in theory, discards these concepts and insists that all participate equally in *laṅgar*. Additionally, the notion behind the distribution of *karāḥ prasād* in the *gurdwārā* further strengthens the idea of equality between all *zāts*.

The egalitarian spirit of the Sikh faith went a step further in welcoming the lower castes; Gurū Arjan purposely designed the *Harmandir Sāhib* building to have four doors, signifying that it was open to all classes. This was a

courageous move, indeed, considering that his was a period where lower *zāts* were refused entry into temples. The ideal of equality was also emphasized by Gurū Gobind Singh in his creation of the *Khālsā* in 1699. All were eligible for initiation, no matter to what *zāt* they belonged. The original *pañj pyāre* came from different castes, including the lower classes. They shared *amrit* from a common bowl: something highly alien to the Hindu caste system. Eradication of *zāt* names in favour of Singh and Kaur meant that an individual's *zāt* could no longer be distinguished by one's *goṭ* (family name). Thus, initially at least, Sikhism appealed very much to the lower castes who underwent initiation via *khaṇde-dī-pāḥul* and became Sikhs.

Although there are no rules regarding commensality patterns, marriages within the Sikh community remained then, and now, endogamous. The connection with Hinduism in this respect therefore, was maintained due to the fact that marriages were to be arranged within one's own *zāt*; indeed, the Sikh Gurūs and their offspring all belonged to, and were all married within, the *khatrī zāt*.²⁴ Thus, caste distinctions were, and continue to be, preserved through the practice of endogamy, by both Sikhs and Hindus. Exogamy is also importantly retained with regard to the *goṭ*. Hence, disunity among Sikhs is visibly apparent through the retention of caste distinctions, although the institution of *laṅgar* promotes the irrelevancy of caste prejudice, the practice of endogamy certainly promotes caste distinctions.²⁵ Inter-*zāt* marriages are, indeed, a source of dishonour to the whole family. This is something that is embedded in the ethnicity of Punjabi Sikhs. The Nāmdhāris are an exception to this: for them inter-caste marriages (but *with* Nāmdhāris) are acceptable. Interestingly, and surprisingly, the Gurūs themselves have nowhere *encouraged* Sikhs to conduct inter-caste marriages.

Contrary to the beliefs of some Hindus, the Gurūs taught that an individual did not have to be reborn countless lifetimes to ascend the hierarchical scale to become a *brāhmin*, and only then have the opportunity for *mukti*. One may be forgiven for hinting at the hypocrisy of the Gurūs. On the one hand they taught Sikhs to abandon caste distinctions, while on the other hand each Gurū chose a *khatrī* as his successor. The Gurūs were related from Gurū Rāmdās onwards; the first three Gurūs, however, had no direct relation to one another. It may well be that the earlier followers of Gurū Nānak were predominantly from the *khatrī zāt*; nevertheless, other *zāts* were attracted towards the apparently casteless Sikh faith as it developed. Then why did none of the later nine Gurūs select a *chūhrā* or *chamār* or even *brāhmin* as successor? The answer may lie in the Gurūs' priorities. If the Gurūs had chosen someone from a different caste, they would have been social reformers; but they were religious reformers. Gurū Nānak wanted individuals to change their *spirituality* not their *zāt*. Changing their spirituality would more naturally effectuate changes in attitudes towards caste.

In contrast to the earlier stages of Sikhism, the later developing community gradually began to recreate discrimination against the low castes: whether or

not this prejudice had ever been abandoned in the first place is debatable and highly unlikely. The lower *zāts* had suffered the harsh discrimination from higher caste Hindus long enough and endeavoured to improve their social situation: Sikhism seemed the answer, initially at least. Unfortunately, caste is so deeply embedded in the Indian psyche that it never had, and still has not been eliminated from the *Panth*. It is because of continued discrimination from higher *zāt* Sikhs that lower *zāt* Sikhs broke their ties with both Sikhism and Hinduism and, as will be seen, formed their own distinct identities. Whereas the low castes had previously been oppressed by the tyranny of the *brāhmīns*, they were now subject to harassment mainly from the landowning Sikh *jaṭs*. The extent of prejudice towards the lower-caste Sikhs is apparent by the fact that low caste Sikhs were often barred from entry to *gurdwārās* for fear of their polluting nature.²⁶ On the point of prejudice, the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* clearly states that all are entitled to enter a *gurdwārā*:

All are free to enter a Gurdwara without any consideration of caste or creed.²⁷

In practice, however, all are not equals in the *gurdwārā*. Moreover, the need to establish caste-based *gurdwārās*, in the *Panth* as a whole, is a clear indication that *zāt* divisions are overtly present. To some extent, different *zāts* within Sikhism have their own traditions and customs. For example, *bhātra* Sikhs tend to be stricter regarding their women than *jaṭs* and *rāmgarhīās*. In this respect the *bhātra* culture is quite different from the *jaṭ* culture, which in some cases is different from the *rāmgarhīā* culture. This is likely to inform the existence of different caste *gurdwārās*, ensuring that worship takes on the preferences of the particular *zāt*. Regrettably, therefore, the low caste Sikhs retained their plebeian status – Sikhism did not truly give them the equality that they desired. Importantly, by converting to Sikhism, Islam and Christianity did not remove the stigma attached to untouchability.

The Position of Scheduled Classes in India

The Ravidāsīs form the largest *zāt* of the Scheduled Classes. The very term ‘Untouchable’ is used by higher castes to indicate the group of people from whom a distance must be kept at all times due to Indian notions of ritual purity and pollution. The concept of ritual purity and pollution is a religious one, and has existed in Indian thought probably from the time of the Aryan invasion into India, and inevitably resulted in the large-scale oppression of the lower castes. The low castes emphatically state that they are the *ādivāsīs*, the original, pre-Aryan inhabitants of India. The Aryans oppressed the *ādivāsīs*, and imposed their own religious order on the original people. Such discrimination becomes maximized when noted that ritual pollution results in the accumulation of bad *karma*: conversely ritual purity, which in this case is accumulated

from contact with higher-class members, brings good *karma*. However, a member of the Scheduled Classes is considered so ritually polluted from birth that no amount of bathing or other rituals can result in ritual purity.

Changing the form of employment (especially in towns and cities) together with emigration from India, have failed to remove the stigma of pollution attached to the Scheduled Classes. A *brāhmin* will become polluted to such an extent on contact with a low-caste person that he will have to undergo bathing,²⁸ and in some cases other rituals, in order to remove the high level of pollution accumulated as the result of such contact. It is interesting to note that even among the Scheduled Classes themselves there are levels that can be regarded as more polluting than others. During my research I found that the Vālmikis are regarded as being lower on the scale than Ravidāsīs. Nevertheless, it is the traditional occupation of the Ravidāsīs as leather-workers (and so coming into contact with dead animals) that makes them a source of pollution to the higher classes.

The Indian social scale of hierarchy is therefore an important consideration when examining the Ravidāsīs, together with the Vālmikis. The *brāhmins*, because of their high degree of ritual purity from birth, and because of their traditional occupations such as priests, temple attendants and performers of sacrifice, have attained a highly-exalted position within Indian society. They are, therefore, traditionally believed to be on the path towards liberation, *mokṣa*. According to Hindu laws of ritual pollution, the Ravidāsīs are regarded as so polluted that they can never be inwardly or outwardly clean. The danger of pollution is further controlled by endogamy. Marriages within the Ravidāsī and Vālmiki communities are also endogamous. It is very rare for a Ravidāsī to have, for example, a Vālmiki spouse. Interestingly, according to Dumont, the *brāhmins* and Scheduled Classes exist to provide stability to the caste system: 'It is clear that the impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman (*sic*). They must have been established together, or in any case have mutually reinforced each other, and we must get used to thinking of them together'.²⁹ Therefore the impurity of the Scheduled Classes has been determined in accordance with the utmost purity of the *brāhmin*: it is an impurity that can never be removed according to traditional Hinduism. The significance of Gurū Ravidās in respect to this matter is that his efforts enabled the consciousness of the lower classes to be raised, and caused them to become more aware of the prejudice against them. It is highly unlikely, however, that the prejudice was ever abandoned, even temporarily, by the higher classes, who continued suppressing members of the Scheduled Classes, justifying it in the name of religion. I must emphasize that the full recognition of Gurū Ravidās among the Scheduled Classes, especially the former *chamārs*, gained importance with the rise of the *Ad Dharm* movement, which is examined below.

Although Article 17 of the Constitution of India has outlawed untouchability, it is apparent that it very much exists in practice today. In the Punjab,

many Ravidāsīs are employed by the *jaṭ* landowners to carry out menial jobs on farms.³⁰ A particularly disturbing, but not untypical, incident, showing *jaṭ* attitudes towards the Ravidāsīs occurred in March 1956 when a group of them were severely beaten by a group of *jaṭ*s for merely drawing water from the public well at Nagaur in the district of Jodhpur.³¹

Today, there are some positive aspects to the situation of the low castes: the cities have offered them better prospects of employment; education has also enabled them to break away from traditional occupations. As the very term ‘Untouchable’ implies pollution, it was due to M.K. Gandhi’s efforts that the Untouchables were renamed as *harijans*, that is, ‘Children of God’. Gandhi believed the practice of untouchability had no place in Hinduism. Until the reforms introduced by the Indian government, Untouchables were denied access to temples. Gandhi’s attitude towards untouchability is clearly expressed in his following words:

I think we are committing a great sin in treating a whole class of people as untouchables and it is owing to the existence of this class that we have still some revolting practices among us. . . . It has been a passion of my life to serve the untouchables because I have felt that I could not remain a Hindu if it was true that untouchability was a part of Hinduism.³²

The term *harijan*, however, as indicated earlier, is resented by the lower castes: they find the term rather patronizing since it does not portray the real state of affairs in Indian society. Many of the lower castes wish to retain the traditional title of *achūt*, which in Hindi is translated as ‘Untouchable’. But the overall preference among the lower castes is the term *Dalit*, which is translated as ‘oppressed’. It is a designation, many believe, that more accurately depicts such a low-caste position within Indian society and is perhaps the most appropriate of terms. Massey clearly portrays the plight of *Dalits* in India as he writes:

The *Dalit* people are those who, on the basis of caste distinctions, have been considered “outcastes”, because the architects of the system did not see fit to include them in the graded four-fold caste structure of Indian society. On the basis of this status they have been made to bear extreme forms of disadvantage and oppression for centuries, a continuous assault on their humanity which virtually reduced them to a state of being “no people”.³³

This depiction of being ‘no people’ distinctly describes the treatment of the *Dalits* in India by the higher classes, especially the *brāhmins*. A typical example of discrimination in the village situation would be that the *Dalits* are often prohibited from drawing water from the well used by higher classes, for fear of ritual pollution to the latter. Importantly, the British during the *Raj*, preferred to rename the Untouchables the ‘Scheduled Classes’ and it was this term that became embodied in the Government of India Act of 1935.³⁴

It is clear then, that being outside the Hindu class system, the *Dalits* were always regarded as Untouchables in Hindu society. They therefore sought to

find equality by converting to the apparently egalitarian faith of Sikhism, which in *gurbāṇī* strictly condemned caste prejudice. However, the Sikh faith was found wanting in translating beliefs concerning equality into practice. The *Dalits*, on becoming Sikhs, found that they continued to be discriminated against by higher *zāt* Sikhs; thus, their social position was no better than if they had remained Untouchable Hindus. Increasing dissatisfaction with their treatment by both higher-caste Sikhs and Hindus led to the development of the *Ad Dharm* movement by a group of educated *Dalits*. The *Ad Dharm* promoted the recognition of Ravidās as Gurū and, in consequence, masses of *Dalits* abandoned Sikhism and Hinduism for a distinct recognition as Ravidāsīs, taking a member of their own *zāt* as Gurū.

Thus, the majority of Ravidāsīs had originally converted to Sikhism. This may be responsible for many Sikh practices surviving among them, as is illustrated below. A significant number, however, have today become Ravidāsīs without the medium of Sikhism, that is, directly from Hinduism, and this may be responsible for certain non-Sikh practices of the community. Increasingly, Ravidāsīs are now being born as followers of Ravidās and not as Hindus or Sikhs. The medium for this transition was the *Ad Dharm* movement. It was this movement that sought to elevate the position of the low *zāts*, both Sikh and Hindu, in Indian society.

The Ad Dharm Movement

The *Ad Dharm* movement, which began to flourish in the 1920s, is responsible for the social and religious uplifting of the Scheduled Classes, in particular, the Ravidāsīs. The term *Ad Dharm* in translation, means ‘original religion’, and is reminiscent of the idea that the Scheduled Classes are the original inhabitants of India. The founder of the *Ad Dharm* movement was Mangoo Rām, an educated *Dalit* who worked as a secondary school teacher.³⁵ Education, however, did not offer Mangoo Rām the social status of which he was deserving. Since he was born a *Dalit* he continued to be discriminated against by Hindu classes. Mangoo Rām had already spent a period of his life in the United States from where he accumulated considerable influence to be able to begin a movement for the uplifting of the lower castes.

The identity being sought for the followers of the *Ad Dharm* was that of a *qaum*, a distinct religious community of people. They were no longer going to be content with just remaining on the lowest strata of Hindu, and Sikh, society in which they were refused equal rights.³⁶ Since they were already being treated as separate from higher-class Sikhs and, indeed, as separate from the followers of Hinduism, then it was feasible that they should think in terms of forming a distinct identity and religion. Importantly, although the *Ad Dharmis* rejected the caste system, the persistence towards establishing their own *qaum* was,

however, based on *zāt*, since it predominantly comprised of members from the *chamār* caste. The *gaumik* identity of the Scheduled Classes, therefore, consisted of their self-constituted superiority over the Aryans. This was reinforced by the suggested origin of the Scheduled Classes as the original inhabitants of India, their status as a separate community, and the accumulation of their own unique traditions.³⁷ The *Ad Dharm* movement was thus regarded as the main medium for the raising of the status of the Scheduled Classes. Its first meeting took place at Jullunder, Punjab in 1925.

It was among the Ravidāsīs, rather than the Vālmīkis that the *Ad Dharm* movement mainly gained acceptance. Many new traditions and customs were introduced, with a special emphasis on the colour red:³⁸ traditionally the *ādivāsīs* were banned from wearing red due to its exclusive association with the Aryans. *Ad Dharmis* encouraged the Scheduled Classes to wear bright red turbans and clothing in order to assert their new identity of equality. The particular emblem and *mantra* of the *Ad Dharm* was *Soham* which is taken from the *Upaniṣads* and means ‘I am That’ – thus again promoting egalitarianism.

The *Ad Dharm* movement was as political as much as it was originally religious. In addition to establishing a new religious identity for the lower classes it also aimed at establishing the *Ad Dharmis* as a political nation, having as much say in the politics of its country as other groups. It was as a result of the British government’s involvement in India that the *Ad Dharmi* leaders seized the opportunity, based on the British ideal of equality among the citizens of India, to voice their opinions and rights, being fully aware that they had the backing of the government. The first political movements among the Scheduled Classes occurred in 1910, resulting in the formation and establishment of the All-India Depressed Classes Association and the All-India Depressed Classes Federation. Both the Federation and the Association aimed at encouraging the Indian National Congress to remove untouchability.³⁹ Political response from the Scheduled Classes also raised the demand amongst them for a country, or at least a state of their own which was to be called ‘Achutistan’ (land of the Untouchables) thus portraying the extent of their intention to establish a distinct identity and nation from both Sikhs and Hindus. The dream of Achutistan however, remained an unfulfilled one.

The *Ad Dharm* rejected the caste system arguing that pre-Aryan India had no caste discrimination. Gurū Ravidās became the posthumous patron of the movement; this could be seen as a large-scale revivalism of him and his teachings. Interestingly, the report of the *Ad Dharm* leaders explicitly stated that the founders of the religion of the *Ad Dharmis* were, in addition to Gurū Ravidās, other low-caste saints such as Vālmīki, Kabīr and Nāmdev.⁴⁰ It was Ravidās’ mission against the oppression of his class members that was carried forward by the *Ad Dharm* through their efforts to abolish the practice of untouchability. The *Ad Dharm* sought to base itself at Benares, the birthplace

of Gurū Ravidās. The aims of the *Ad Dharm* were revolutionary in the history of the traditional position of Untouchables in India. The social reforms of the *Ad Dharm* are aptly portrayed in the following report:

In addition to the political aspect of *Ad Dharm* Mandal,⁴¹ Jullundur, which has been very successful, there is even a greater emphasis on social reform. The religious and organizational status of the Untouchable has been raised through our efforts. For example, we are getting education for Untouchable children. As one wise man of the Punjab put it, “*Ad Dharm* has performed miracles beyond imagination.” To us, no talk is worthwhile without action. We are not interested in simply collecting money the way the other groups are doing. They collect money for their own luxuries, for their own names. Our principle is solely humanitarian. As someone has said, “It is only the struggle for humanity’s improvement which is worth the pain of having been created.” And as Guru Ravi Das has said, “for the spirit of sympathy, the whole body is created”.⁴²

The census of 1931 was to be a turning point in the mission of the *Ad Dharmis*. It was looked forward to with great enthusiasm since this census would determine once and for all the identity of the followers of the *Ad Dharm* movement.⁴³ Prior to this, members of the Scheduled Classes were to be enumerated as Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. Now, however, they had the opportunity to include themselves under their own distinct identity. There was a great determination on behalf of the Hindus and Sikhs for the *Ad Dharmis* not to be counted separately. They carried out physical attacks on the *Ad Dharmis* as part of the pressure placed on them not to record themselves as belonging to the *Ad Dharmi* category in the census.⁴⁴ But the *Ad Dharmi* leaders had persevered on this issue of identity as a distinct *qaum*, and strengthened their followers against the expected persecution. The following song of the *Ad Dharm* illustrates this very well:

Leave the bickering behind,
And tie your turban red;
We do not have to record
Any *qaum* other than our own;
So, *Ad Dharmi*, be strong.⁴⁵

Census figures show that a total of 418,789 *Ad Dharmis* had been recorded in the Punjab.⁴⁶ This was a great achievement, bearing in mind that their first formal meeting had only taken place in 1925. The fact that many *Ad Dharmis* are likely to have been forced to state either Hindu or Sikh as their religion, must also be borne in mind. One point that was surely determined by the 1931 census is that the *Ad Dharmis* were to be seen as a distinct *qaum* from now on, with Gurū Ravidās as their leader. They were neither Hindus nor Sikhs.

But the dissolution of the *Ad Dharm* movement was gradually beginning because of its over-involvement in politics, and insufficient concern over its religious aspect. The office of the *Ad Dharm* at Jullunder was officially closed

by Mangoo Rām, in June 1946. Article 17 of the Constitution of India, in January 1950, finally abolished untouchability and made its practice illegal. The Scheduled Classes were indiscriminately to be allowed access into all temples and were to be given jobs in the government, and had the right to become educated. However, according to my personal experience of caste while in India, the practice of untouchability, especially in the villages, still continues, and is still endorsed by Sikhs. This is a pronounced contradiction of *gurbāṇī*. In the cities, however, the former Scheduled Classes have the right to resort to lawsuits if they feel that they have been discriminated against in employment. The vigorous pursuit towards equality, which had been fought by the *Ad Dharmi* leaders on behalf of the Scheduled Classes, and for their future generations, is summed up in their report below:

In short, the founding of the *Ad Dharm* Mandal is for humanitarian purposes and to fulfil our duty to humanity. We carry the banner of the downtrodden people, and we devote our entire lives to the cause, so that future generations may follow in our footsteps and follow the cause, a cause which has long been neglected.⁴⁷

The modern, twentieth-century status of Ravidās as Gurū of his followers is, therefore, inextricably bound to the *Ad Dharm* leaders and their vigorous pursuit for equality which was denied to them by the apparently egalitarian Sikh faith.⁴⁸

The Dalit Welfare Association (DWA)

Outside of India, the first Ravidāsī *sabhā* was established in Wolverhampton, England, in 1962 due to the large number of Ravidāsīs living there. Significantly, this was a major step for the Ravidāsīs who set out to proclaim their rights to set up their own places of worship. The first Ravidās *sabhā* in the diaspora has been described as:

a body of those people who are interested in well-being of Ravidassia community, Ad-Dharmi community, backward classes So (*sic*) called Untachables (*sic*), the poorest of the world and who care for as well as bleave (*sic*) in humanity: Since the formation of this sabha in 1963, it has tried it (*sic*) best to unite our people who are dedicated and devoted to the teaching and philosophy of Shri Gurū Ravidass Ji. Here we like to mention that this Sabha has achieved a very high place in our own people and in multicultural society in this country and in India with its work and deeds towards the upliftment (*sic*) of our poor masses.⁴⁹

Prominent among the Ravidāsī community was the establishment of the Dalit Welfare Association (DWA) in 1984, which was involved in the promotion of literature dealing with the lower castes, in particular the Ravidāsīs: its concern was to uplift the Dalit youth mentally.⁵⁰ The DWA was based at the Wolverhampton Ravidāsī Sabhā and has also published literature on the life

and teachings of Gurū Ravidās. Its primary function, to promote the teachings and philosophy of Ravidās, was through publishing pamphlets, articles in newspapers, and generally educating the Ravidāsīs about the life and teachings of their Gurū. The DWA was also anxious to promote awareness to society about the injustices committed against the lower castes in India. With the help of Bilston College, Wolverhampton, English classes were offered to members of the Ravidāsī community. Cassettes, focusing on the teachings of Gurū Ravidās were also distributed among the community. The DWA had been involved in the political matters of the Ravidāsī community. The inspiration for the formation of the DWA was the older members of the Ravidāsī community, who aspired for the Ravidāsī community to be politically involved in matters concerning them. Hence, the DWA endeavoured to provide education for the Ravidāsī community, as well as to promote a sense of equality and to arrange social events for the community to gather together.

A Brief Discussion of the *bāṇī* of Ravidās and its Comparison with some of the Teachings of Gurū Nānak

The hymns of Ravidās contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, are regarded as the most authentic of his works; indeed, a single and separate composite collection of his hymns was never made. In addition to the presence of the hymns of Ravidās in the *Ādi Granth*, scattered references to his works are present in the writings of other authors, such as the Fathepur Manuscript and the *Pāc-vāṇī*.⁵¹ I believe Ravidās, like Gurū Nānak, was an heir of the *Sant* tradition of Northern India. This would explain the consonance and congruity of thought between the two men. It is necessary to assess the extent to which the compositions of Gurū Ravidās echo Sikh metaphysics as a whole.

The Concept and Name of God

Ravidās's God is essentially the *nirguṇa* God of the *Sants*. This is a God who is never born, who is Infinite, Imperishable, Unconquerable and Complete.⁵² But such a *nirguṇa* aspect does not preclude a highly devotional worship, *bhakti*, as the following hymn of Ravidās shows:

True love I have joined with Thee, O Lord.
 Attaching myself to Thee, I have broken with all others.
 Whither-so-ever I go, thither I perform Thine service.
 There is no other Lord, like Thee, O God. (AG 659)⁵³

This highlights well the monotheistic approach to a formless God in line with Sikh philosophy in general: there is no other God than the One Supreme God. Gurū Ravidās taught that one should form attachment to God only, attaching

oneself to the temporary lures of the material world may bring physical pleasure, but the individual will continue to remain in separation from God. It is thoughts such as these that might suggest evidence as to why Ravidās's works were included in the *Ādi Granth*, and which highlight the common, shared *Sant* heritage of Gurū Ravidās and Gurū Nānak. The works of *bhagats*, such as Kabīr, Nāmdev and Ravidās, were included in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* due to their similarity with the hymns of the Sikh Gurūs.⁵⁴ Ravidās shows preference for the name Rām for God. Gurū Nānak, in contrast, does not have any prominent name for God, although he uses Rām occasionally. Instead, he refers to God simply as *Nām*: indicative of the essence, but not form, of God in the world.

Nānak's use of *Nām* reflects the formlessness of God: whereas the use of more tangible names could indicate an image of God in the devotee's mind. The God of Gurū Nānak, and the Sikh Gurūs, is essentially *nirguṇa*.⁵⁵ Moreover, the very fact that a God takes human form, according to the Hindu doctrine of *avatārs*, inevitably means its involvement in death. McLeod clarifies this claim:

To be incarnated means to be involved in death, which is the supreme enemy, the characteristic quality of the unstable world and the ultimate antithesis of God's own eternal being . . . This, by implication, means that there can be no place for a doctrine of *avatars* . . .⁵⁶

A question arising from Ravidās's hymns is that, if he describes God as Rām, does this mean his view differs from Gurū Nānak's thought, or is his concept of God essentially equal to that of Gurū Nānak's? The *Nām* of God undoubtedly holds importance in Ravidās's thought:

After due deliberation Vyas has said the supreme truth, that nothing equals the Lord's Name. (AG 1106)⁵⁷

This hymn is reminiscent of the teachings of Gurū Nānak with regard to the *Name* of God:

The men, bereft of the Name, fall like the saline wall.
Without the Name, how can one be released? The wise one falls into hell in the end. (AG 934)⁵⁸

Apart from referring to God as Rām, an examination of the hymns of Ravidās does not suggest any other prominent name for God. The concept of the *Nām* seems to be similar to Gurū Nānak's teachings on the *Nām*, that is to say, that it is indicative of the manifest *essence* of God in the world, but not of any *form* of God: God cannot be given a name in this latter sense. *Nām simran* will bring one closer to God because it is meditating on his essence; it is bringing God into the heart of the self. However, Ravidās himself never actually uses the term *nām simran*, instead he uses the term *Rām japan*, which indicates meditating on the name of Rām.⁵⁹ This is essentially equivalent to Gurū Nānak's concept of *nām simran*. Referring to God as Rām cannot be taken to mean that the God of Ravidās was in any sense the *sagūṇa* God of Vaiṣṇavites. Indeed, there are many

instances in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* where Gurū Nānak refers to God as *Harī*, *Rām* and *Allah*, this does not imply that Gurū Nānak believed in the multiplicity of Gods: rather, he believed the One God has different attributes but at the same time cannot be given a more concrete name. Indeed, in another hymn, Ravidās openly claims that contemplating God's *Name* is in itself the highest act of worship, and that it replaces popular ritualism; this act will lead the individual out of the illusory *māyā* and result in the realization that true bliss is to be united with God:

Thy Name is the water and Thy Name the sandal. The repetition of Thy Name is the grating of sandal. Taking the Name I offer it unto Thee.

Thy Name is the lamp and Thy Name the wick. Taking the oil of Thy Name, I pour it therein.

Thy Name is the light, which I have applied to the lamp and it has enlightened the whole world. (AG 694)⁶⁰

The hymns of Gurū Ravidās found in the *Pāc-vāñī* also include many references to his use of the term *Rām* for the Supreme God.⁶¹ Like the use of the term *Rām* in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* this does not mean at all that his hymns in the *Pāc-vāñī* have a pronounced *avatār* aspect to them. Accepting that Ravidās was an heir to the Northern *Sant* tradition can justify his using the term *Rām* for the essentially *nirguṇa* aspect of the Supreme. Using Vaiṣṇava names for the formless *saṅga* and *nirguṇa* Absolute was a common feature of *Sant* tradition.⁶²

It is interesting to note that Ravidās also uses the term *Satgurū* to refer to the Supreme, thus the term cannot be said to have originated in Gurū Nānak's writings.⁶³ Ravidās' usage of the term *Satgurū*, which can be attributed to his *Sant* learning, is clearly expressed in the following:

the Satguru cries out aloud,
If you wish to perform humble service,
that is what devotion longs for.⁶⁴

Thus, as in the hymns of Gurū Nānak, Ravidās's concept of God is also that of a totally transcendent Absolute that is beyond the conception of the human mind (AG 858). In the words of Gurū Nānak:

Thousands are Thine eyes, yet thou hast no eye.
Thousands are Thine forms, yet Thou hast not even one.
Thousands are Thine holy feet, yet Thou hast not one foot.
Thousands are Thine noses and yet Thou art without a nose.
I am bewitched by these plays of Thine. (AG 663)⁶⁵

The affinity with Gurū Nānak's hymns and the *nirguṇa* nature of Ravidās's concept of God, are clearly declared in his following words:

Says Ravi Dass, why say more regarding the ineffable discourses of God?
What Thou art, that Thou art alone. To what can I liken thy praise? (AG 858)⁶⁶

In the hymns of Ravidās, as in the hymns of Gurū Nānak, the *Nām*, the essential essence of God, is depicted through his compassion, his giving of salvation, and his forgiveness of sinners who wish to be united with God. Clearly, then, both Ravidās and Gurū Nānak express the importance of the devotee meditating on the *Nām* of God: this in itself is the greatest act of *bhakti*. Accentuation of the *Nām* is a central feature of *Sant* belief.

Bhakti

According to the followers of Ravidās, there are a total of nine types of *bhakti*: the *bhakti* advocated by Ravidās is that of *prema-bhakti* (the highest *bhakti*) which is complete and utter love for God. This *bhakti* exemplifies the extent of devotion which Ravidās himself had for the Supreme God. *Prema-bhakti* is also referred to as *bhava-bhakti* by the northern *Sants*,⁶⁷ thus the teachings of Ravidās concerning *prema-bhakti* may also possibly be attributed to his *Sant* background. The devotee's longing for God, in the same way as the bride's longing for her beloved, which is referred to as *virāha*, is also a feature of *prema-bhakti*, in which the *bhaktā* yearns for union with God.⁶⁸ Ravidāsīs believe that God can be realized by all, regardless of caste, as long as one prays to God with loving devotion. This is, indeed, reminiscent of the *bāṇī* of the Sikh Gurūs. Ravidās taught:

God, the King, fathers no one but him who loves Him. (AG 658).⁶⁹

Karma and Predestination

The concepts of *karma* and predestination, in the context of liberation, present a paradox in Sikh metaphysics, the anomaly being whether God is wholly responsible for the individual's life, acts and liberation, or whether the individual through one's own efforts can work towards liberation. An examination of Gurū Nānak's teachings appears to emphasize the complete sovereignty of God. This inevitably precipitates his view that the *Nadar* of God plays the vital role in the liberation of the individual. Thus, fundamental in Gurū Nānak's thought is the idea that ultimate union with God is the responsibility of God, rather than the individual (AG 1).

However, the opinion that the operation of *Nadar* is dependent on the individual's initial voluntary orientation towards God is very important.⁷⁰ The individual needs primarily to decide whether one wishes to be united with God. Once this decision has been taken, *Nadar* is offered to help achieve *mukti*. But, it is debatable whether this would have been the belief of Gurū Nānak; God's Grace, almost by definition is 'pre-venient', always present before human initiative. In the *Mool Mantar* it is clear that the truth about God is revealed by

the *Nadar* of God, without this revelation an individual cannot turn towards God:

By the Guru's grace (He is obtained).

Embrace his meditation.

True in the prime, True in the beginning of ages, True He is even now and True He, verily shall be, O Nanak! (AG 1)⁷¹

Thus, predominant in Gurū Nānak's hymns is his insistence on the utmost supremacy of God as being vital to each individual's achievement of *mukti*. Ultimately this does not mean, however, that *karma* plays no role – an anomaly in relation to the *Nadar* of God. One of Ravidās' hymns alludes to the idea that the only hope of escaping the law of *karma* is for the individual to have the mercy of God bestowed on oneself. Indeed, Ravidās refers to God as the *Lord of Bliss*. This expresses affinity with Gurū Nānak's thought: it is through God's *Nadar* that *mukti* can be achieved (AG 486). It is clear, too, that for Ravidās God can overcome the *karma* that binds the individual to reincarnation:

Thou knowest, I am nothing, O my Lord, the Destroyer of dread.

All the sentient beings seek Thy refuge, O Lord, the Adjuster of all the affairs.

(AG 858)⁷²

Inseparable from the concept of predestination is the concept of *Hukam*, which is translated as God's 'Will'. Of major importance in Gurū Nānak's teachings is the idea that everything in the universe ensues in accordance with the *Hukam*; since God is All-Powerful, he knows what each individual's *karmic* outcome will be. All is done according to the *Hukam* of God (AG 154). This last point is a *Sant* characteristic that is also present in Ravidās's hymns. He makes the point that it is in accordance with the Will that even low-caste individuals can achieve *mukti*:

O my Love (God), who but Thee can do such a thing?

O my Lord, the Patroniser of the poor and the Lord of the world, Thou hast put over my head the umbrella of Thine grace. (AG 1106)⁷³

Does the emphasis on *Nadar* and *Hukam* mean that the human is a mere puppet without any personal volition? It is important to note that the bestowal of divine Grace does not mean the giving of salvation. What it does mean is that, through the bestowal of such Grace, the individual now has the opportunity to seek and gain enlightenment through his or her own efforts: this is where the *karma* of the individual plays a role. Salvation ultimately comes only through *Nadar*. Nevertheless, the individual can work towards salvation *because* of the *Nadar*. The law of *karma* is operative in the thought of Gurū Nānak. However, it operates within the overall function of *Hukam* (AG 1107).

Despite what has been said above, it is plain to see that there is sometimes an apparent paradox in Gurū Nānak's teachings regarding *karma* and *Nadar*. On

the one hand he exemplifies the individual's role in shaping his or her own destiny:

As man acts, so is he rewarded; as he himself sows, so does he himself eat (reaps).
(AG 662)⁷⁴

On the other hand, however, the outstanding necessity of *Nadar* and *Hukam* in deciding whether one will gain *mukti* is an important theme of Gurū Nānak's hymns:

In Thy will, the man crosses the dreadful world-ocean and in Thy will, he is filled with sins and is drowned in it. (AG 762)⁷⁵

In light of the apparent enigma found in the teachings of Gurū Nānak, Ravidās in the following hymn from the *Pāc-vāṇī* exhibits a tendency towards believing that each individual's own efforts are essential on the path towards *mukti*. Desire is to be abandoned, and this will lead to the loss of the ego:

If you stop yearning after the supreme state,
bliss becomes reality.⁷⁶

The fact that 'bliss becomes reality' when the ego is lost, seems to suggest a lack of God's ultimate role in individual salvation. And Ravidās' following hymn also shows an absence to any reference of God's participation:

Devotion arises when the sense of 'self' is lost,
abiding in contemplation within.⁷⁷

Although *bhakti* is obviously towards God, there is no mention of God actually being *wholly* responsible in accordance with the *Hukam* for individual *mukti*. The following hymn contained in the *Pāc-vāṇī* however, provides a slight allusion to God's role in *mukti*:

refrain I have come, I have come,
my God, into your refuge.
Know me as your servant,
be merciful to me.⁷⁸

Does the reference to 'be merciful' indicate that God's mercy is to be used in the same context as God's Grace? Clearly, the fact that one has to search for emphasis on the *Nadar* of God in the *Pāc-vāṇī* contrasts sharply with the words of Ravidās in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* where he *does* refer to the role of *Nadar* in salvation:

I dedicate and offer my body and soul as my worship.
By Guru's grace, I attain to the Immaculate Lord. (AG 525)⁷⁹

Although utmost authority rests with the *Nadar* of God, it is arguable whether Ravidās would have viewed the efforts of the individual as being worthless. He frequently mentioned the fact that the practice of meditating on the *Nām* of

God will enable one to be closer to God (AG 694) and this implies individual effort. Yet he also repeatedly mentioned that release is dependent only on the Grace of God (AG 486). Therefore, according to Ravidās, although *Nadar* is absolutely essential, efforts on the part of the devotee, such as meditating on the *Nām* are also important.

Ravidās mentions that the total of one's accumulated *karma* is important for the individual who does not achieve union with God because of ego (*ahaṃkāra*) and ignorance (*avidyā*). The consequences of bad *karma* (*pāpa*) will have to be reaped in the next life (AG 1196). Since the law of *karma* is so deeply entrenched in Indian metaphysics, its validity cannot be ignored. And as far as the efforts of an individual are concerned, free will must exist, otherwise there is no reason why the human race should be endowed with the sense of discrimination. The fact that humans are unique in God's creation suggests the point that humans alone have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. God has given each individual free will under his sovereign *Hukam*. The individual has been *chosen* to receive *mukti*. It is then up to each individual either to realize the *Hukam* and thus tread on the path that leads towards salvation, or, otherwise, deny the *Hukam* and remain trapped within *saṃsāra*.⁸⁰ Similar to the teachings of Gurū Nānak, Ravidās stressed that it is on God that the final decision to emancipate the individual from *saṃsāra* depends. Supporting the importance of *Nadar*, Ravidās portrays God as the controller that decides the fate of his creation (AG 487). The sovereignty of God in each individual's liberation supports my contention of a shared Northern *Sant* heritage of both men.

Overcoming avidyā

Gurū Ravidās explained that the cause of the individual's separation from God is ignorance or *māyā*, which leads one to perceive worldly wealth and pleasures as being permanent. The mind of the worldly-wise individual is clouded by *avidyā*, preventing the perception of reality as being an inseparable part of God. Overcoming ignorance can be achieved through meditating on the *Name* of God with loving devotion in order to reveal true knowledge about God (AG 486). In the *Pāc-vāṇī*, also, Ravidās views the world as a grand illusion that will disappear, once the individual has overcome *avidyā*:

Everything perishes which can be seen,
no one believes in what cannot be seen.
That devotee is free from desire
who says 'Ram is beyond description'.⁸¹

What did he mean by this? Nānak perceived the world as real, because it has been created by God, although in a finite state. Does Ravidās refer to an illusionary, unreal world, or is there similarity in the views of both men? The

gurmukh, in Gurū Nānak's thought, views the material pleasures and lures of the world as being temporary and unbeneficial to the ultimate goal of the soul. The *manmukh* however, is obsessed with accumulating material wealth, as opposed to spiritual wealth, believing the world to be a permanent entity and drawing further away from the love of God, thus remaining entangled in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. These ideas are reflected in the thought of Ravidās who proclaims meditating on the *Name* as the means for overcoming *māyā*:

Raidas says: My tongue, chant *ram*!

Maya never remains anyone's companion.⁸²

The aim of human life according to Ravidās, therefore, is to overcome ignorance that will lead to the cessation of *saṃsāra*. Abiding in heaven is not the goal, since it will involve rebirth once the effects of accumulated *pūnya* have been reaped. Likewise, a rebirth into hell does not mean an end to *saṃsāra* either, as indicated by the *Pāc-vāṇī*.⁸³ *Bhakti* is extolled by Gurū Ravidās in both the *Ādi Granth* and *Pāc-vāṇī* as being essential if one is to gain *mukti*. It is the paths of *bhakti-marga* and *karma-marga* that are advocated by Ravidās in the *Pāc-vāṇī*. Therefore, there is a rejection of *jñāna-marga* (the path of knowledge) whereby one subdues the senses and realizes the true nature of the self. Indeed, the path of knowledge is thoroughly introspective and world denying, and this rejection of it is further evidence that Ravidās eschewed the notion of a completely illusionary world, along with the ascetic path of renunciation.⁸⁴ The ignorance to be overcome is the ignorance that lures the self-centred individual to the world and away from God.

The Self

The concept of the self, as taught by Ravidās is summarized in his following verse:

Thou art me, I am Thou. What is the difference.

The same as between gold and its bracelet and between water and its ripples.

(AG 93)⁸⁵

In the same way as the golden bangle does not differ in its essential composition from the piece of gold from which it was taken so, too, the essential nature of the *jīva*, the self, is at one with God. This is not suggesting monism but, rather, that the essence of God pervades each individual soul. Ravidāsīs believe that the individual's body is composed of three parts – the material body, *tan*, the mind, *man*, and the soul, *jīva*. The *jīva* is the most important entity for this is eternal; the *tan* is the mere physical body that houses the *jīva*. On the *jīva*'s release from the *tan*, the *tan* is a heap of waste that thereafter has no relevance or use.⁸⁶ The *man* is responsible for the state and condition of the *jīva*'s rebirth, it is within the *man* of the *jīva* that

ahamkara is contained, and this must be removed if the *jīva* is to gain *mukti* (AG 793).

The concept of the self in the *bāṇī* of Ravidās is very similar to the Sikh concept of the self. Sikhism teaches that, although the essence of God pervades the heart of each human soul, ultimately God is beyond and above all that He has created. Therefore, both Ravidās and the Sikh Gurūs teach the dual nature between the self and God. At *mukti* the soul will not become God but will exist in a blissful relationship *with* God. This is a mystical, but dual, union.

Caste

Ravidās's teachings on caste are pertinent since as an Untouchable, he was outside Hindu social classes. It might be expected, then, that the relevance he attached to the social position of an individual would occur in his hymns.⁸⁷ It was precisely Gurū Nānak's denial of the belief in ritual purity and pollution that influenced his conception of the *laṅgar*.⁸⁸ The custom of *laṅgar* is also accepted by the Ravidāsīs and is a feature of the *sabhās*. In this respect the followers of Ravidās and Gurū Nānak have much in common, since both leaders taught the total irrelevance of concepts such as ritual pollution associated with food. Ravidās came into much confrontation with the higher classes, who were unyielding in their beliefs on caste distinctions.

Reality

Gurū Ravidās' teachings on reality are more pronounced in the *Pāc-vāṇī* where he states:

refrain Whoever abides in the experience of Ram
is touched by the philosopher's stone –
He has no sense of duality.⁸⁹

Ravidās is referring to the non-duality of all existence in an egoless state; it is highly unlikely he is referring to a unity with the divine in a monistic sense. He who experiences the divine loses the ego and therefore ceases to differentiate between this and that, rich and poor, good and evil, low caste and high caste, thus resulting in an absence of duality. The hymn may also apply to the mystical union between God and the devotee – perhaps a Nāth influence on the thought of Ravidās.⁹⁰ This mystical union, as opposed to a more overt duality existing at *mukti*, is also a characteristic feature of Gurū Nānak's thought,⁹¹ and forms the core of Sikh philosophy.

Sant Influence

There is a tendency in the hymns of Ravidās to warn his readers against believing that the pleasures of the world are real and take primacy over the worship of God.⁹² This warning is a characteristic feature of the *Sant* tradition and stresses the idea that existence without God is not really an existence at all.

Common themes in the works of both Gurū Nānak and Ravidās are a result of the *Sant sadhana*, indicating that according to the *Sants*, *mukti* is based on three pillars:

- a Insistence on the divine *Name* (*nāma*);
- b *Bhakti* to the *Satgurū*, the Divine Gurū; and
- c The importance of the *satsaṅgal*.⁹³

All three pillars play a prominent part in the religious thought of both Gurū Nānak and Ravidās, as illustrated in their hymns found in both the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the *Pāc-vāṇī* of Ravidās. Since devotion is to be offered to the Supreme God alone, there is no scope for intermediaries. In line with Sikh thought therefore, Ravidās insists on devotion to the One God only:

Those who renounce a diamond like Hari,
and pin their hopes on others,
Shall go to death's city –
this is the truth, says Raidas.⁹⁴

The resemblance of ideas in the hymns of both men are also reflected in the language of the hymns known as the *Sant Bhasa*, the language of the *Sants*.⁹⁵ Therefore, the usage of common words to describe certain themes would have been inevitable. The *Sant Bhasa* was widely used in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by north Indian poets.

Although the beliefs of the Ravidāsīs seem essentially criteria *for* a Sikh identity, the Ravidāsīs *do not* wish to be labelled as adhering to such. The differences between the beliefs of the Ravidāsīs and the general *Panth* revolve around the central tenet of the acceptance of Ravidās as the founder and Gurū of the group. For those *Dalits* that converted to Sikhism the later shift to a Ravidāsī identity would have been a fairly smooth one considering the similarity of basic beliefs. Had they been accepted by Sikhs the consequent focus on Ravidās as Gurū would probably never have occurred. But it is, indeed, the similarity of ideas that provides the links with present-day Sikh religious philosophy.

The congruity of foundational philosophy might suggest that there is every reason for interactive interdependent belief and praxis between Ravidāsīs and Sikhs, and an easier interface between one and the other. While the nature of the Ravidāsī faith is so similar to Sikhism that some might wish to view them as Sikhs of a sort, the ethos of the Ravidāsīs is separatist to the extent that there is

a self-expressed divorce from the Sikh faith. It is *zāt* discrimination that has brought this about and that will remain a fundamental criterion in assessing the ‘Sikhness’ of any group. Evidently, issues concerning *zāt* override considerations of belief as a determinant of identity.

Practices: Sikh or Ravidāsī?

The main centre of Ravidāsī practice is the *sabhā*, which functions as a socio-religious gathering place for the Ravidāsī community. Importantly, the religious places of worship are not called *gurdwārās*. The *sabhās* play an important role in the lives of the diaspora Ravidāsī community, since it is here that the particular practices and traditions of the community are upheld and are used to guide the followers, in particular, the younger generation. The practices of the Ravidāsīs are important since they are used as criteria with which to assess the identity of the Ravidāsī community. Furthermore, they present an important perspective in relation to overall Sikh identity.

Worship

During worship, in addition to Sikh practices such as the *ardās*, Hindu practices such as that akin to the waving of a lamp during the performance of the *arati*⁹⁶ are observed. But rather than *arati* to one of the Hindu forms of God, the *sabhā* practices *arati* of the *Name*. During the *arati* hymn the Ravidāsī devotee recites:

Nām tero arati

Thy Name, O God, is my *arati*

On completion of the *arati* hymn that praises Ravidās, the slogan of

Jo boley so nirbhay Shri Gurū Ravidāss Jī kī jai!

That person is fearless who recites the praise of Gurū Ravidās!

is shouted out loud, rather like the usual Sikh slogan of

Jo bole so nihāl sātīākāl!

that is also shouted out loud at the end of a Sikh service. The pattern of the *ardās* also differs from that of *ardās* in a Sikh service. The intention of *ardās* is to highlight the life and teachings of Gurū Ravidās. It is believed that Gurū Ravidās himself began his *bhakti* with *ardās*.⁹⁷ After *ardās*, too, the slogan is repeated:

Jo boley so nirbhay Shri Gurū Ravidāss Jī kī Jai!

Importantly, the followers are declaring their Ravidāsī identity. The order of worship in a *gurdwārā* takes the form of: *kīrtan*, *Anand Sāhib*, *ardās*, a *hukamnāmā* (command for the day) from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, distribution of

kaṛāh prasād. In contrast, worship in a Ravidāsī temple follows the order of: *kīrtan* (usually from the hymns of Ravidās), *arati*, *Anand Sāhib*, *ardās*, *hukamnāmā*, distribution of *kaṛāh prasād*.

The first step towards a distinct identity is illustrated by the fact that there is usually no *arati* in worship taking place in most *gurdwārās*, an exception are *bhātra gurdwārās*. On normal worship days, only the *arati* hymn is recited, the beginning of this is as follows:

*Nām Tero Aarti Majanu Muraray
Har Ke Nām bin Jhuthay Sagal Pasārey*

Thy Name, O God, is mine *ARATI* and mine ablutions,
without the name of God all display is vain

On special days, however, such as the days when *akhaṇḍ pāths* are held to commemorate a *gurpurb*, the *arati* act is performed; this is known as the full *arati*. Both males and females perform *arati*. Regarding the performance of *arati*, I must point out that I have witnessed this taking place in a number of *gurdwārās* of the general *Panth*, especially those of the *bhātras*. Notably, therefore, the mere performance of *arati* cannot be taken as an indication of the non-Sikh orientation of Ravidāsī practice. The very practice of *arati* however, contradicts Sikh teachings: the custom is condemned as superstitious in the *Rehat Maryādā*:

It is considered superstitious to ring bells, burn incense, light ghee-lamps and wave them in a *platter* before the Guru Granth Sahib.⁹⁸

The full *arati* is a feature of Hindu worship; it is not to be performed by Sikhs. A further feature that differentiates worship in the *sabhā* from that in a *gurdwārā* is that prominence is given to the hymns of Gurū Ravidās, and other low-caste saints, over the hymns of the Sikh Gurūs. The ringing of bells is also present during Ravidāsī worship, and is accompanied by the sound of a conch: both are distinctively Hindu practices.

Celebrations

Special significance is attributed towards Gurū Ravidās and other saints from the low castes: emphasis is on their own *zāt* Gurū. Although the festivals of *ḍīwālī* and *baisākhī* are celebrated, they are not celebrated in the same manner as by Sikhs. This again illustrates the Ravidāsī insistence on being distinct from the Sikh faith. And yet, many other Ravidāsīs contradictorily remark that the reason for celebrating *ḍīwālī* is to commemorate the release of the sixth Sikh Gurū, Hargobind from imprisonment: an example *per se* of a more Sikh orientation.

The *gurpurb* of Ravidās is the most important celebration of the year and is

heralded with much excitement by the Ravidāsīs. The occasion is marked by an *akhaṇḍ pāth* – this has clear Sikh overtones. The annual *gurpurb* functions to strengthen the identity of the Ravidāsī community since the majority of attendants are present for a common reason: to celebrate the birth anniversary of *their* Gurū. The *nīsān sāhib* is changed on the *gurpurb* of Ravidās rather than on *baisākhī*, thus clearly distinguishing the Ravidāsīs from the *Panth* and displaying their non-observance of the *Khālsā*. The practice of performing full *arati* also takes place on the *gurpurb* of Ravidās.

Marriages

The practice of endogamous marriages takes place within the Ravidāsī community, as in Indian society overall. A Ravidāsī will only marry a Ravidāsī. Most marriage ceremonies are performed in the *sabhā*. The *sabhās* also have the right to be able to perform register marriages within the building; registering marriages is compulsory since it is through these that the marriage certificate can be obtained. The order of marriage among Ravidāsīs is analogous to that of the Sikh tradition: the couple take four *phas* around the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. This, however, should not be pressed too far since the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is used *only* for the hymns of Ravidās. Nevertheless, the recital of the *lāvān* hymn points to the Sikh nature of the wedding ceremony amongst Ravidāsīs.

Nīsān sāhib

Present outside the *sabhā* building is the *nīsān sāhib*, the characteristic emblem of a Sikh place of worship. However, the Ravidāsī *nīsān sāhib* is red instead of the saffron yellow seen elsewhere. The red colour, as mentioned earlier, is indicative of the *Ad Dharm*'s emphasis on equality. Moreover, the *nīsān sāhib* takes a distinctively Ravidāsī form: instead of the *Khaṇḍā* being present, the Punjabi inscription of the *Hare* symbol, which indicates the *Name* of God, is present, surrounded by the first line of the *arati* hymn: '*Nam Tero Arati*'. Stars or other decorations which may be visible on the *nīsān sāhib* always add up to 41, symbolizing the number of Ravidās's hymns contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. While the building may occasionally be referred to as a *gurdwārā* (and therefore the presence of the *nīsān sāhib* points out that the building is a *gurdwārā*) the design of the *nīsān sāhib* is deliberately changed from that of the Sikh *nīsān sāhib* in order for passers-by and members of the community to understand that the building is specifically a Ravidāsī centre.

Unlike the congregation at the *gurdwārā*, there is no emphasis on the *Khālsā* form, although a number of *kesdhāris* are often present at the *sabhās*. Quite often the *giānis* and *rāgis* are *kesdhāris*. It is important to note that among other Sikhs such as the *jaṭs* and *rāmgarhiās*, clean-shaven individuals are visible in the *gurdwārās*. The tendency, however, is greater among the Ravidāsī community,

thus portraying their intention not to be regarded as *Khālsā* Sikhs. Regarding the issue of hair, McLeod writes:

If a *Jat* cuts his hair, there is a strong likelihood that his claims to be regarded as a Sikh will continue to be recognized. If, however, any member of the *Khatri/Arora/Ahluwalia* group should do likewise, he will usually be treated thereafter as a Hindu. The same is also true of Harijan Sikhs except that in their case the alternative identity could conceivably be Christian.⁹⁹

The slogan of *Hare* is visibly present at the *sabhās*, to the same extent that the *Khaṇḍā* and *Ik-Onkār* symbols are present in *gurdwārās*. The symbol *Hare* represents the ‘spirit of the Almighty God’. It serves to replace the position of the Sikh *Khaṇḍā* and occurs thus:

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It has become unique to the Ravidāsīs. The significance given to the symbol of *Hare*, and the complete absence of the *Khaṇḍā*, suggests that the Ravidāsīs do not wish to court a Sikh identity. Since the *Khaṇḍā* represents the *Khālsā*, it is inevitable that it would not be given any importance because of the fact that Ravidāsīs do not adhere to the *Khālsā*. Although the Ravidāsīs have veneration for the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, this is due simply to the fact that it includes the most authentic collection of their Gurū’s hymns.

Thus, the prevalence of Ravidās in religious practices clearly illustrates that, because of their non-acceptance as equals in the *Panth* and with the subsequent emergence of the *Ad Dharm* movement, today the Ravidāsīs are increasingly in favour of an identity as followers of Gurū Ravidās.

The Distinctiveness of Ravidāsīs

The main aim of Ravidāsī *sabhās* with regard to religion is explicitly stated in its constitution:

To worship almighty God in accordance with the teachings and principles of Shri Guru Ravi Dass Ji from the Holy Book Shri Guru Granth Sahib.¹⁰⁰

Although the individual *sabhās* have their own constitutions, the above aim is true of all Ravidāsī *sabhās*. It is plain to see that major emphasis is placed on the teachings of Ravidās rather than the Sikh Gurūs. Since all the *sabhās* attach primary importance to Ravidās rather than the Sikh Gurūs, this indicates the explicitly non-Sikh identity of the community. Most significantly, the *sabhās* promote the Ravidāsī identity among the former *Dalits*. This preference for Ravidās is against the prescribed behaviour of a Sikh as given in the *Rehat*

Maryādā, which states that a Sikh should not follow the teachings of any other apart from those of the ten Sikh Gurūs:

[A Sikh should] Live a life based on the teachings of the ten Gurus, the Holy Guru Granth Sahib, and other scriptures and teachings of the Gurus.¹⁰¹

In this respect, therefore, the Ravidāsīs cannot be regarded as Sikhs, when the *Rehat Maryādā* is taken as the yardstick. Indeed, the *Khālsā* ideal prescribed by the *Rehat Maryādā* is totally rejected by the Ravidāsīs.

The accentuated importance of celebrating the *gurburb* of Ravidās further prevents the Ravidāsīs from affiliating to a Sikh identity. In the Punjab the confusion over the identity of the Ravidāsīs had existed because many had converted to Sikhism, but the stigma attached to their Hindu heritage of untouchability remained. Hence the Ravidāsīs were caught in the midst of Hindus and Sikhs, with neither faith accepting them as a part of its community. The *Ad Dharm* movement thus gave them an identity with which to associate. It is interesting to note a Ravidāsī child's description of her identity:

I know what culture I am, Hindu, but it's not as if we're restricted to Hindu because we believe in Sikhism as well. It's just one thing really.¹⁰²

According to Leivesley (who has carried out extensive research among the Ravidāsīs) the Ravidāsīs are not Sikhs but are within the Sikh universe. This is due to their using the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, observing *laṅgar* and following a few Sikh customs.¹⁰³ There are considerably more points at which they converge with Sikhism; in particular, the underpinning philosophy that informs religious belief and practice. Their religious thought, as illustrated above, is probably due to the *Sant* heritage of both Gurū Nānak and Ravidās. Leivesley rightly suggests that they are not Hindus either, but have their own identity as Ravidāsīs: thus culturally the Ravidāsīs are *chamārs*, politically they are *Ad Dharmis*.¹⁰⁴ I have found that although the Ravidāsīs utilize the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and retain certain Sikh praxis, the insistence is on *distinctiveness*, not on identification with the *Panth* or, indeed, with any wider *qaum*. And despite the instalment of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in their religious places of worship, and a complementary philosophy, the Sikh identity of the Ravidāsīs is questionable and very limited. As indicated above, Ravidāsīs will cease their usage of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* if the hymns of Ravidās were ever collected into one composite volume. Sewa Singh Kalsi, who has also carried out research among the Ravidāsīs, however, is of a different opinion.

Kalsi considers that the Ravidāsīs are Sikhs but were forced to set up their own *gurdwārās* due to their treatment by higher-caste Sikhs, who maintained notions of purity and pollution and thereby did not allow the Ravidāsīs to prepare *laṅgar* in the *gurdwārā*.¹⁰⁵ Thus, by setting up their own *gurdwārās*, the Ravidāsīs remained Sikhs and were able to practice Sikhism within their own *zāt* community where they were not subject to prejudice from higher-caste

Sikhs. The question of their identity for Kalsi, therefore, is that they are to be regarded as Sikhs since they converted to Sikhism. This should, theoretically, be the case. However, their non-acceptance by the *Panth* as a whole caused them to reject the Sikh faith and find religious satisfaction through the teachings of their own *zāt* Gurū, and my contention is that they have now totally rejected a Sikh identity. Although retaining a number of Sikh orientated practices, the Ravidāsīs assert that these practices have no overt connections to the *Panth*.

Those Ravidāsīs who converted to Sikhism in the past, it might be claimed, should be regarded as Sikhs. They were, however, made to feel that they were not part of the *Panth*. Therefore, although having historical Sikh connections, many of those who became Sikhs have rejected a Sikh identity in favour of a distinct Ravidāsī identity. It follows that gradually the Ravidāsīs ceased to keep the outward symbols of Sikhism that they had eagerly embraced at conversion. Thus, this has resulted in some Sikh praxis among the Ravidāsī community. In some communities the praxis may be more Sikh than Hindu, and *vice versa* in other communities. Either way, it is an inheritance of beliefs and practices that have synchronized into distinctiveness and separation as followers of Gurū Ravidās. Significantly therefore, religious groups hardly arise out of a vacuum, they need to be informed by some immediate past traditions.

Interestingly, a Ravidāsī *giānī* remarked that the identity of the community is confusing; he commented that those who revere the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are Sikhs. But, regarding the Ravidāsīs, it is up to each individual whether he or she wishes to be referred to as Sikh or as *Ad Dharmi*. He declared further that the Ravidāsī committee itself had not yet clarified the issue of identity. Significantly, nevertheless, the majority of the followers of Ravidās describe themselves as Ravidāsīs – not as Hindus or Sikhs. Therefore, to be a Ravidāsī is to follow the teachings of Gurū Ravidās, even if these appear very similar to those of Gurū Nanak.

A good example of the syncretistic Hindu/Sikh inheritance is the practice of distributing *kaṛāh prasād*. Similar to worship in *gurdwārās* of the general *Panth*, *kaṛāh prasād* is distributed at the end of the main service and this is a feature of Hindu temple worship, too. The Open University in England has produced a video about the Ravidāsīs, in which one speaker has voiced that, as a low-caste person, he was refused *kaṛāh prasād* in both India and Britain: thus by distributing *kaṛāh prasād*, the Ravidāsīs exclude no one from the *sabhā*.¹⁰⁶ The importance of *laṅgar* is not rejected, therefore, in the Ravidāsī *sabhās*. The tradition is maintained but its distinctive Ravidāsī nature is characterized at the same time. Such differences underline the complex situation of whether the community is to be regarded as Hindu or Sikh or, a distinct movement separate from both. But while adoption of Hindu and Sikh traditions may, at first glance, suggest some identity with these religions, particularly the latter, it is the deeper issues that are of relevance here. Ultimately, there is a rejection of

the *Khālsā*. Thus, the presence of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* indicates a surface Sikh orientation, the performance of *arati* a Hindu orientation, and the emphasis on Ravidās's hymns a distinct Ravidāsī orientation. Underpinning all, however, is a complete rejection of caste-ridden Hinduism and Sikhism, and *Khālsā* Sikhism in general.

The efforts which have gone towards distinguishing their religious places of worship as distinctively Ravidāsī temples, and the lack of references to Sikhism within those temples, illustrate fully the idea that the Ravidāsīs do not wish to be placed merely within the scope of Sikhism, or for that matter Hinduism: they are neither of these religions. With regard to a Hindu identity, it is only a minute percentage of Ravidāsīs who regard themselves as being a sect of the Hindu religion. A few followers also refer to themselves as being Sikhs. This problem of providing clear-cut boundaries for the Ravidāsī community has been pointed out by Nesbitt:

The existence of the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities highlights the pitfalls of any over-easy definition of individuals or communities as 'Hindu' or 'Sikh'. Both these communities are Punjabi, both have separate premises for corporate worship in Punjab and in Britain (e.g. Coventry, Southall). In both communities some members have Hindu-sounding names such as Anita Devi, Ram Lal, while others have Sikh-style names, e.g. Avtar Singh, Kulvinder Kaur.¹⁰⁷

Again, Nesbitt points to the dangers of establishing identity from surface issues. In fact, having Hindu names is no more indicative of a Hindu than a westerner with an old Hebrew name like Daniel, Gabriel or Adam being a Jew. It is interesting to note that although many Ravidāsīs retain Kaur and Singh in their names, these same individuals emphatically claim they are not Sikhs but are Ravidāsīs.

According to Kalsi, the *sabhā* is a *gurdwārā* since, wherever a copy of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is installed, that place becomes a *gurdwārā*.¹⁰⁸ However, I find that the term *sabhā* is the most appropriate to use for Ravidāsī temples. This is the term used by the Ravidāsīs themselves. Such a claim is supported by the lack of any emphasis on a Sikh identity. The prominence is given to Ravidās over the Sikh Gurūs and, moreover, the very term 'Sikh' is absent from the majority of *sabhās*. In addition, the supremacy given to the symbol *Hare* further separates the *sabhā* from practices in a *gurdwārā*. However, one cannot ignore that the *gurdwārā* aspect of the *sabhā* is emphasized through participation in *laṅgar*. This is a traditional feature of Sikhism that has been retained by the Ravidāsīs, but it is not an indication of their desire to be labelled as Sikhs: rather, it serves to strengthen the concept of equality among the congregation. The term *sabhā* is indicative of 'a rather loose association found among high castes',¹⁰⁹ therefore, the purpose in labelling the Ravidāsī centres as *sabhās* is probably due to the Ravidāsī's assertion of their equality with the higher castes and, more importantly, of their distinct identity from Sikhs.

Being a follower of Ravidās, therefore, entails utmost belief in *his* teachings, rather than on the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs. In their total insistence on Ravidās, the community of his followers places no importance on taking *amrit* or on the Five Ks. No *Khālsā* initiation ceremonies take place in the *sabhās*. This total abstinence from the *amrit* ceremony and its outward symbolism clearly places the Ravidāsīs outside the boundary of *Khālsā* Sikhism. Significantly, the Ravidāsīs constitute a critique of Sikhism. It is, indeed, groups such as the Ravidāsīs that challenge the corporate identity in Sikhism. After all, the Ravidāsīs *were* prepared to accept *Khālsā* Sikhism that said nothing about its hidden caste prejudice. Ravidāsīs as a group expose the Sikhs as *not* following their Gurūs' teachings on the issue of equality and, thereby, Sikhs undermine their own criteria for uniform identity. The discriminatory attitude of higher-caste Sikhs towards the Ravidāsīs is demonstrated by the fact that many Sikhs will not refer to the *sabhā* as the Ravidāsī temple, but will insist on referring to it as the *chamār gurdwārā*. While attributing the status of a Sikh place of worship to Ravidāsī temples, the unfortunate point here is the caste prejudice against the worshippers. The majority of higher-caste Sikhs would not eat in a Ravidāsī house or in the *sabhās*, thus disobeying Sikh teachings associated with the *laṅgar*. Many Ravidāsīs express their regret that they are not made to feel welcome in Sikh *gurdwārās* or Hindu temples.¹¹⁰ While many Sikhs will resent the fact that the Ravidāsīs do not wish to be perceived as being Sikh, they will not give the Ravidāsīs equality with themselves either. In terms of Sikh identity, then, it is clear that low *zāt* status is a criterion that bars a group from being acceptable within the *Panth*: there is no space for the overruling of caste distinctions in Sikhism generally.

In the case of the Ravidāsīs, it is more of a definite distinction *from*, rather than *within*, the *Panth*. They themselves do not wish to be seen as affiliating to a Sikh identity. This is very different to the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā and the Nāmdhāris who, although differing from general Sikhs in certain respects are, nevertheless, Sikhs, and who, moreover, consider *themselves* Sikh. The *mazhabī* Sikh conversion to the Sikh faith also has important implications for Sikh identity, these are explored in [Chapter Five](#).

Notes

¹ The *Ad Dharm* movement, as will be seen, raised the psyche of the Ravidāsīs.

² Kalsi, S.S. (1992) *The Evolution of A Sikh Community*, Leeds: University of Leeds, p. 126.

³ Bharti, B. and Mal, M. (undated) *Guru Ravidass Ji: His Life and Teachings*, Wolverhampton: Dalit Welfare Association UK, p. 32.

⁴ *Raidās Ji Kī Bāṇī aur Jivan Charitra*, (1908) Allahabad: Belvedere Steam Printing Works, p. 1.

⁵ Raju, K.S. (undated) *Ho Banjaro Rām Ko*, Chandigarh: Ratna Memorial Trust, p. 13.

⁶ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), p. 2162.

⁷ Ibid., p. 1607.

⁸ Singh, Darshan (1981) *A Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, Patiala: Punjabi University Patiala, pp. 38–39. Darshan Singh refers Sahib Singh's *Adi Baerh Bare*, (1970, Amritsar: Singh Brothers, pp. 85–108), as alluding to this belief. However, on reading this source, there appears to be no direct document to which Sahib Singh points as evidence for his belief; he believes that *gurbāṇī* itself is evident of Gurū Nānak's knowledge of the *bhagat bāṇī*.

⁹ See McLeod, W.H. (1976) *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 71.

¹⁰ *Raidās Ji Kī Bāṇī aur Jīvan Charitra*, p. 1.

¹¹ The account goes on to say that Ravidās as a baby remembered some aspects of his previous life, by which he refused to suckle the milk of his now *chamār* mother (*Raidās Ji Kī Bāṇī aur Jīvan Charitra*, p. 2). It was not until Ramananda came, as an order from God (in the text called *Bhagwān*) to visit the baby, that Ravidās then began to suckle his mother's milk. The text states that Ramananda had named the child as Ravidās, and the name Raidās was also applied after some time (ibid., p. 2).

¹² Mukandpuri, N.S. Mahi, *The Teachings of Guru Ravidass*, Birmingham: Guru Ravidas Cultural Association, p. 19. The ceremony involved disciples pouring water over the feet of Ravidās and then drinking the water that had been gathered into a bowl.

¹³ Singh, D., *A Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, pp. 38–39.

¹⁴ Bharti and Mal, *Guru Ravidass Ji*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Singh, D., *A Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, p. 20.

¹⁶ The issue concerning the dates of Ravidās, has been discussed in greater detail by Callewaert, W.M. and Friedlander, P.G. (1992) *The Life and Works of Raidas*, Delhi: Manohar, pp. 26–28. Darshan Singh mentions that there is a problem in claiming that Ravidās was initiated into the spiritual life by Ramananda, since, according to *brāhmanic* laws, a low-caste person cannot be initiated into the social order by a *brāhmin* (Singh, Darshan, *A Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, p. 37). Yet it may have been possible for Ravidās to have met Ramananda if one accepts the dates of Ravidās as being 1414 CE–1540 CE, and Ramananda as having lived until the third quarter of the fifteenth century.

¹⁷ The hymns of Ravidās contain references to Kabīr (AG 1293). Darshan Singh, citing Rabindranath Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, (London: Macmillan, 1962) draws attention to the fact that Ravidās is also referred to in the hymns of Kabīr (Singh, D. ibid., p. 7). This suggests that Kabīr knew of Ravidās. A major consideration here, however, is that the authenticity of the hymns collected by Tagore is doubtful. Tagore's work is based on an earlier collection by a Bengali collector known as Kshitimohan Sen, who amalgamated various hymns concerning Kabīr from oral traditions prevalent among *sadhūs*. Hence, since oral traditions are no definite source of authenticity, the alleged reference to Ravidās by Kabīr as an indication of the latter's awareness of Ravidās cannot be accepted with any certainty. Furthermore, although according to popular tradition Kabīr was a predecessor of Ravidās, there is disagreement over the dates of Kabīr (Sen, Kshitimohan, (1974) *Medieval Mysticism of India*, Delhi: Oriental Reprint, pp. 87–88).

¹⁸ Traditional belief among the Ravidāsi community and, indeed, the Hindu followers of Mirābai, proclaim Ravidās as the gurū of the famous female *bhaktan*, Mirābai (Bharti and Mal, *Guru Ravidass Ji*, p. 30). Mirābai is believed to have been a princess, born around 1498 CE (Alston, A.J. (1980) *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 1) and is renowned for her utmost devotion to Kṛṣṇa, whom she regarded as her husband in every sense. Alston, however, is of the opinion that it would be highly unlikely that Ravidās was Mirābai's personal gurū because of the problem regarding the dates of both individuals: as mentioned earlier Mirābai is believed to have been born around 1498 CE, whereas Alston believes Ravidās taught in the mid-fifteenth century (ibid., p. 4). The dates of Mirābai are also not agreed on. On the other hand, if the dates of Ravidās are accepted as 1414–1540, then it is possible for the two to have met.

¹⁹ A few variations on dates concerning Ravidās will illustrate the number of different viewpoints: The All India Adi-Dharam Mission and the Sadhu Samperdai Society of the Punjab give the birth date of Ravidās as 1414 CE (Bharti and Mal, *Guru Ravidass Ji*, p. 11). McLeod considers Ravidās to have probably been born around 1440 CE, and to have died in 1518 CE, McLeod, W.H. (1996 rp of 1968 edn) *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 155. Raju cites the birth date as being either 1376 CE or 1433 CE, and states that most followers celebrate Ravidās' birth anniversary either on 15 January or 15 February (Raju, *Ho Banjaro Rām Ko*, p. 23). The *Raidās Ji Kī Bāñī aur Jīvan Charitra* mentions Ravidās as a contemporary of Kabīr, whom the author of the text believes had lived in the fourteenth century (*Raidās Ji Kī Bāñī aur Jīvan Charitra*, p. 1).

²⁰ McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 56.

²¹ Singh, D., *A Study of Bhakta Ravidasa*, p. 5. Mardānā was the musician friend of Gurū Nānak who accompanied him on all his travels.

²² *Souvenir on the 572nd Birth Anniversary of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji* (1986) Birmingham: Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha UK, p. 28.

²³ *Raidās Ji Kī Bāñī aur Jīvan Charitra*, p. 7.

²⁴ A mercantile caste. All except the eighth Gurū were married; Gurū Harkrishan died at the age of eight from an attack of smallpox.

²⁵ Ballard, R., 'Differentiation and Disjunction Amongst the Sikhs in Britain' in Barrier, N.G. and Dusenbery, V.A. (1989) *The Sikh Diaspora*, Delhi: Chanakya Publications, p. 203.

²⁶ McLeod, W.H. (1992 rp of 1989) *Who is a Sikh?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 69.

²⁷ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada* (1978) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 7.

²⁸ The bath is the most common means of the purifying ritual, see Dumont, L. (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 48.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁰ The numbers of *chamārs* employed by *jaṭs* is now decreasing. Instead, workers are increasingly being employed from Uttar Pradesh.

³¹ Ghurye, G.S. (1994 rp of 1986 edn) *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p. 332.

³² Richards, G. (1985) *A Source-Book of Modern Hinduism*, London: Curzon Press, p. 161.

³³ Cited in Massey, J. (1997) *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, pp. 1–2.

³⁴ Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, p. 306.

³⁵ The advantage of leaders like Mangoo Rām is that they were at least literate, which was quite unusual for *chamārs* in this period of history.

³⁶ Page 42 of 'The Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal' explicitly states: 'Each Ad Dharmi should separate himself from Hindus, Sikhs, and members of other religions' see Juergensmeyer, M. (1982) *Religion as Social Vision*, California: University of California Press, p. 307.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Page 11 of 'The Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal, 1926–1931' cited in *ibid.*, p. 299.

⁴¹ *Mandal* is the term used to refer to an organization, that is, the *Ad Dharm Mandal*.

⁴² Page 5 of 'The Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal, 1926–1931' in Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*, p. 294.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁷ Page 5 of 'The Report of the Ad Dharm Mandal, 1926–1931' cited in *ibid.*, p. 294.

⁴⁸ The *Ad Dharm* leaders, in their search for religious acceptance, echoed the reform spirit of Ravidās in his own search to demonstrate the inappropriateness of prejudice based on caste distinctions.

⁴⁹ *Brief History of This Sabhā* (undated), leaflet printed by the Guru Ravidass Temple, Wolverhampton. The full leaflet can be seen in Figure A.10 in the Appendix.

⁵⁰ Information on the DWA has been obtained from the Wolverhampton *sabhā*.

⁵¹ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 37.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

⁵³ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), p. 2161.

⁵⁴ McLeod, W.H. (1984) *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 5.

⁵⁵ It is emphasized that the concept of God, according to the thought of Gurū Nānak, is essentially monotheistic: importantly, Gurū Nānak rejects the *avatār* concept prevalent in Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, resulting in the monotheistic nature of God as one of the most important doctrines of the Sikh faith. Nevertheless, in Hindu thought one may believe in a manifestation, or an *avatār*, for example Kṛṣṇa, and regard it as the major form of the Absolute *Brāhman*. This, also, is suggestive of a monotheistic approach to the Divine. But, even though all divine manifestations in Hinduism are ultimately one, Gurū Nānak's thought had no room for physical conceptualizations or bodily forms of God (AG 1038).

⁵⁶ McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 3647.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3050.

⁵⁹ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 98.

⁶⁰ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 2272.

⁶¹ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 107.

⁶² Schomer, K. and McLeod, W.H. (1987) *The Sants*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 7.

⁶³ The followers of Ravidās believe that the term was originally coined by Ravidās and 'borrowed' by Gurū Nānak.

⁶⁴ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 146.

⁶⁵ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 2174.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2796.

⁶⁷ Vaudeville, C. in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 2159.

⁷⁰ Singh, Ishar (1988) *The Philosophy of Guru Nanak*, Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, p. 205.

⁷¹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 2796.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 3646.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2171.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2483.

⁷⁶ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 107.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 1733.

⁸⁰ If the individual did not have the right of free will then there would be no apparent urgency to raise the *manmukh*, one who is attached to worldly pleasures, to the level of *gurmukh*, one who is orientated towards God. An analogy has been drawn between the *Hukam* and the Sun: each individual has free will which may be compared to earth, the comparison being made with the fact that, just as the earth revolves around the sun, which is equated to the *Hukam*, the earth also has a rotation of its own, see Mansukhani, G.S. (1982) *Aspects of Sikhism*, India: Punjabi Writers, p. 70.

⁸¹ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, pp. 105–106.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁸³ 'I realised that heaven and hell are the same – in both there is error, brother!' (*ibid.*, p. 107).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸⁵ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 314.

⁸⁶ Raju, *Ho Banjaro Rām Ko*, p. 172.

⁸⁷ The prevalent Hindu view during the period in which Ravidās lived, was that only those individuals who belonged to the twice-born, *dvijā*, classes could attain salvation, *mokṣa*. Ravidās, however, went against contemporary practices and beliefs and taught that the path towards salvation was available to all who devoted themselves to worshipping God, regardless of what one's class or caste was (AG 858). Nānak taught the same.

⁸⁸ The *laingar* was essentially put into regular practice by the third Sikh Gurū, Amardās. The practice of commensality, whereby only members of the same class would eat together to minimise the risk of pollution, was shown to be irrelevant.

⁸⁹ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 105.

⁹⁰ McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, p. 153.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 82.

⁹³ Vaudeville, C. in *The Sants*, p. 31.

⁹⁴ Callewaert and Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 169.

⁹⁵ McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ *Arati* is the act of waving *divās* in front of the gurū or deity being worshipped or respected.

⁹⁷ Raju, *Ho Banjaro Rām Ko*, p. 150.

⁹⁸ *Amritsar, Rehat Maryada*, p. 6.

⁹⁹ McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?* p. 111.

¹⁰⁰ *Amended Constitution of Shri Guru Ravi Dass Sabha, Southall*, (1979), p. 2 (a).

¹⁰¹ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada*, p. 12.

¹⁰² Jackson, R. and Nesbitt, E. (1993) *Hindu Children in Britain*, Staffordshire: Trentham Books, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Leivesley, A. (1986) 'Ravidasias of the West Midlands', in *Sikh Bulletin*, 3: 37–38.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Kalsi, *The Evolution of a Sikh Community*, pp. 130, 137.

¹⁰⁶ Open University Video: 'Man's Religious Quest – The Ravidasias Birmingham'.

¹⁰⁷ Nesbitt, E.M., 'Pitfalls in Religious Taxonomy: Hindus and Sikhs, Valmiki and Ravidasis' in *Religion Today*, 6 (1990): 11.

¹⁰⁸ Kalsi, *The Evolution of a Sikh Community*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁹ Lannoy, R. (1971) *The Speaking Tree*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 165.

¹¹⁰ Open University Video: 'Man's Religious Quest – The Ravidasias Birmingham'.

Chapter 5

Vālmīkis

The Vālmīki community is a caste-based group that takes Vālmīki, the alleged author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as its Gurū. Vālmīkis adamantly affirm that their Gurū was also of their *zāt*. Importantly, Vālmīki's religious background was Hindu. Indeed, his alleged composition, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is an important text for popular Hinduism to the present day. The anomalies this presents to a Sikh identity among the Vālmīkis is an interesting issue. Today the majority of Vālmīkis, like the Ravidāsīs, have moved away from a Sikh orientation into a specifically Vālmīki recognition.

The historical connection of the Vālmīkis with the developing *Panth* arises significantly from the event in history when the severed head of Gurū Tegh Bahādur was carried by a member of the lower *zāts*, Bhāi Jaitā (also known as Bhāi Rangretā) and taken to the young Gobind Dās. It was as a witness to Rangretā's courage in taking the Gurū's head from the Mughal invaders, that the child Gobind spoke the words: '*Rangreti Gurū ki betī*' 'the Rangretiās are the children of God'. It was following this event that large numbers of *Rangretiās* took *amrit* and entered the *Panth* in the hope of achieving equality with the other Sikh *zāts*, a hope enhanced by the fact that *gurbāṇī* stresses the irrelevancy of *zāt*. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to untouchability, as seen in the case of the Ravidāsīs, endured in the *Panth*. Moreover, the distinctiveness of the lower *zāts* from the upper was significantly retained due to the fact that the *Rangretiā* converts were distinguished under the term '*mazhabī* Sikhs'. This term, although translated as 'the religious ones', nevertheless indicated that such persons were of a lower *zāt*.

A major influx into the *Panth* by the *mazhabīs* took place during the early decades of the twentieth century.¹ The *mazhabīs* had already enjoyed a marked recognition in Sikhism since the time of Gurū Gobind Singh as a result of the actions of Bhāi Jaitā. On their conversion to Sikhism, the initiates were probably initially referred to collectively as Rangretiā Sikhs. Eventually the term began to be used synonymously with *mazhabī*. It is not very clear from which period in Sikh history the term *mazhabī* actually originated,² it was not in regular usage in the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Therefore, initially the term Rangretiā was probably the more usual term to refer to the low-caste converts into Sikhism.³ The very fact that the term *mazhabī* was coined to separate the higher castes from the lower, illustrates, very clearly, that in practice the *Panth* was, and still is, ignoring the egalitarian teachings of *gurbāṇī*.

Thus, from the very beginning, a distinction was present between the higher *zāt* Sikhs and those who were from the low castes. Like the term *harijan*, many Vālmikis resent the title of *mazhabī*: they argue that if they are so-called Sikhs then why do they have a distinct term to mark them out as the ‘religious ones’? Does this mean that the higher-caste Sikhs are not religious? Prejudice towards the *mazhabīs* did, and continues to, take place, especially in India.

At times it is difficult to ascertain whether the person of Vālmīki is a legend or an actual historical figure. Obviously according to Vālmīki tradition, as well as popular Indian belief, since Vālmīki allegedly composed the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he is believed to have existed. But there remains some uncertainty concerning references to Vālmīki as author of the epic in various sources. Nevertheless, in firmly believing that Vālmīki, the Great Sage, single-handedly composed the original epic of Rāma, the Vālmīki community adamantly reveres the author as its *zāt* leader, and accepts that the Great Sage was of their *zāt*.

The followers of Vālmīki zealously regard him as *mahārṣi* (a great sage/holy man), as their Gurū, their spiritual leader. He is often referred to as *Jagat Gurū Vālmīk Mahārāj*, that is, ‘Vālmīki the Gurū of the World’. It is often the case that the term ‘Vālmīki’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘Bālmīki’, this is due to pronunciation differences by which Punjabi speakers substitute the letter *v* for the letter *b*. The dialects of Punjabi also mean that some Punjabis will use the *b*, whereas other Punjabis will use the *v*.

Who was Vālmīki?

There is very little factual evidence that can be utilized with regard to the life details of Vālmīki. Importantly, it is also difficult to ascertain whether he was the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. But the Vālmīki community firmly assert that their Gurū was an actual *historical* person, endowed with divine qualities. It is due to the exalted and, at times god-like, position of Vālmīki held by his followers that hagiography is a common feature of the traditional tales or stories surrounding him. This is common to the legends of all great individuals and blurs any evidence that can point towards an interpretation of beliefs about Vālmīki. The main source for gathering details about Vālmīki is the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, traditionally believed to have been composed by Vālmīki. Scholars generally agree on the date of composition of the epic to be between 400 BCE and 200 CE.⁴ On the other hand however, there are scholars who are of the opinion that the date of composition cannot be cited with any certainty.⁵

The *Rāmāyaṇa* belongs to the *smṛti* class of Hindu literature, and refers to literature that is ‘remembered’. Thus *smṛti* literature is often portrayed in the form of a story, like that of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Since Vālmīki is commonly referred to as *ādikavī*, the first poet, his epic the *Rāmāyaṇa* is referred to as *ādikavyā*, the first poem. Gathering information from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its present form

however, presents complexities with regard to the original nature of the work. Although Vālmīki is believed to have composed the original *Rāmāyaṇa* single-handedly, its first and final books in their interpolated present form are now accepted as being of a later date than the main text. Doubt arises over factual life-details of Vālmīki when it is borne in mind that the majority of details about Vālmīki are found in these two augmented books. Because of their later composition and ambiguous authorship, these details of the life of Vālmīki cannot be regarded as authentic.⁶

Vālmīkis believe that their Gurū is also the author of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, sometimes referred to as the *Mahārāmāyaṇa*. The work itself, however, cites no author⁷ therefore scholarly debate is widely differing with regard to its fabricator. The literature is highly metaphysical in nature, and focuses on a dialogue between the renowned sage Vasiṣṭha (the family priest who was advisor to King Daśaratha and his sons) and Rāma. Importantly, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is used by various Vālmīki *sabhās* to provide guidelines for their metaphysical beliefs. As Shastri comments, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is spiritually important because it 'deals with the inner development of Shri Rāma as opposed to his outer deeds and ... remains one of the most authoritative and respected philosophical treatises of Vedanta'.⁸ It is important for its contribution to the spiritual identity of Vālmīki adherents.

The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is also a useful source when examining details about Vālmīki. This work was not composed by the Sage Vālmīki, but is nevertheless, based on the main themes in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. No author can be attributed to the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. It differs from the original in many aspects: the most significant departures are details regarding the earlier life of Vālmīki, and the text's emphasis on promoting the divine nature of Rāma to a greater degree than that found in the original by Vālmīki. The divine nature of Rāma is not fully articulated in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*: although Vālmīki is aware that his main character is an *avatār* of Viṣṇu, he concentrates on the human nature of Rāma. It is more so in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* that Rāma becomes a deity to whom worship is offered.⁹

The famous Hindi version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Tulsidās, known as the *Rāmacaritāmānas* ('Lake of the Acts of Rāma') is also useful. This source again differs from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* with regard to the details of the sage's earlier life, and with its further aim of developing the divine nature of the hero of the epic. It is due to Tulsidās' Hindi version of the original by Vālmīki that Rāma is popularly worshipped as a personal deity. Therefore, it is the *Rāmacaritāmānas* that is used widely by those who offer *bhakti* to Rāma. Vālmīkis themselves do not use Tulsidās' version since their focus of attention is Vālmīki himself, and not Rāma; worship for them is accentuated around Mahārṣi Vālmīki, and thus only his original epic is used.

It is from the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and Tulsidās' *Rāmacaritāmānas*, which are interpretations of the original work, that Vālmīki is popularly regarded as

having been a robber who later transformed into a sage. Although stating that Vālmiki was born a *brāhmin*, the author of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* puts forward the idea that Vālmiki had begun associating with robbers and, furthermore, that he had children from a low-caste woman.¹⁰ This account is also found in the *Rāmacaritāmānas*. Both works proceed to describe how Vālmiki had met seven sages who told him to ask his family whether they would be ready to reap the results of the sin he had incurred as the result of the lootings: the family answered in the negative. Thus, Vālmiki, wishing to repent for his sins, returned to the sages who advised him to repeat *mārā-mārā-mārā*: this is, of course, the name of Rāma recited backwards. Both accounts state that many years had passed whilst Vālmiki remained in the same place, chanting *mārā-mārā-mārā*, and during the course of time an anthill, *vālmika*, had encompassed the whole of Vālmiki's body. Hence the term Vālmiki, 'born out of an anthill' refers to the spiritual rebirth of the now sage.¹¹ It is only the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* that is used by the Vālmikis themselves, therefore, they adhere to the life account of their Gurū as stated in his *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Since it is Tulsidās' *Rāmacaritāmāna* that is used widely on a popular devotional level, the majority of non-Vālmikis accept the 'robber-transformed-into-saint' tradition surrounding Vālmiki's early life account. This is a view that is outrightly rejected by the Vālmikis who are dismayed that the majority of Indians have accepted a misleading view of their Gurū, which is nowhere supported in the original *ādikavyā*.

Noticeably the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* contains no hymns composed by the sage. An obvious reason for this is that the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic takes the form of a narrative rather than a metaphysical, spiritual approach like the hymns of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Furthermore, the epic involves, although very slightly, the recognition of the hero as an *avatār*; this is in contrast to Sikh belief that has no scope for *avatārs*. Indeed, the prominence given to the *Rāmāyaṇa* by the Vālmikis immediately raises questions concerning their Sikh alliance. An indirect reference to Vālmiki, however, is cited in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* via a verse by Ravidās, in which he refers to the caste of Vālmiki:

Why lookest thou not at Balmik?

From what a low caste, what a high rank obtained he? Sublime is the Lord's devotional service (AG 1124)¹²

While pertinent also to the wider context of Vālmiki belief and practice, the Vālmiki community itself publishes informative material. From this literature, the two most important are a series of monthly newsletters, given the title *The Service*, which contains various articles that are of interest to the community both religiously and socially, and is published in Birmingham, England. The other publication, *Vālmik Jagrītī* takes on a more religious nature including the correct way of religious practice for followers. These two publications contain important details about the life of Vālmiki that are accepted by his followers.

The dates of Vālmīki, if he is accepted as an historical person, cannot be cited with any certainty. The *Vālmīk Jagrītī* states that Vālmīki was born in 3,000 BCE,¹³ this is also supported by *The Service*.¹⁴ His dating revolves only around the issue of whether he was a contemporary of Rāma or not, and the Vālmīki community themselves firmly hold that their Gurū was a contemporary of Rāma.¹⁵

The *Bālā Kandā*, the first book (though probably a later addition) clearly states that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was narrated to Vālmīki by the divine sage Narada:

Having heard the story of the life of the sagacious Rama from the lips of Narada, which, when recounted, confers perfect righteousness on the hearer, the holy Sage [Vālmīki] wished to know more concerning this sacred theme.¹⁶

This does not necessarily mean that Vālmīki had never met Rāma. But the chapter further highlights the fact that the whole of the saga of Rāma was experienced by Vālmīki, through the grace of Brahmā.¹⁷

The *Yuddha Kandā*, the sixth book, and traditionally believed to be the final book of the original epic composed by Vālmīki, makes no mention of the instruction of Narada for the compilation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. So why does the first book, the *Bālā Kandā*, explicitly state this? The need for Book One to be interpolated may have arisen from the fact that Vālmīki was from a low-caste background. Therefore, in order for his work to be accepted by higher-class Hindus, the additions were made in order to stress that knowledge about Rāma had been granted to Vālmīki by Narada, thus, making Vālmīki socially acceptable. Books Two to Six have no mention of a divine vision.

The date of Vālmīki's other work, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is also difficult to ascertain. Vālmīkis themselves believe that the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* was originally part of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*: this makes sense when one realizes that the work takes the form of a metaphysical discourse between Rāma and the sage Vasiṣṭha. The *Vālmīk Jagrītī* expresses this prevalent belief among Vālmīkis:

Bhagwan Valmik Ji composed the Ramayana, and the Yoga Vasistha as one book. At some stage in the by-gone years these were separated, one being called The Ramayana and the other Yoga-Vasistha.¹⁸

While there are contradictory theories about the person Vālmīki, and his acceptance as a historical reality, a number of scholars are of the opinion that Vālmīki was most definitely an historical person.¹⁹ But even among the Vālmīkis themselves, there are differing views and beliefs with regard to the genealogy of their Gurū.

One of the most significant traditions among his followers is that Vālmīki was of a low-caste Hindu background. This appears to be an obvious stance since the Vālmīkis would be proud of a Gurū of their own *zāt* who is seen, primarily among his followers, to elevate their position amongst the hierarchical caste system, in which the *Dalits* are at the very bottom. Many

Vālmikis resent the fact that, in order to make him socially acceptable, higher-class Hindus will tend to insist on Vālmiki's *brāhminical* ancestry.

Another important work, the *Srī Vālmiki Prakāśa*, states that Vālmiki was once of the *cāṇḍāla* low caste.²⁰ It would seem strange that, if Vālmiki were not of a low caste, he should be revered as Gurū by his community of followers. Contrary to the alleged low-caste birth, one fact that clearly emerges from the traditions is that both Rāma and his brothers regarded the sage Vālmiki as being from the twice-born classes. Nowhere is it cited in the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* that Vālmiki is of a low-caste origin. Rather it is the insistence on Vālmiki's high caste that is echoed in the words of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for Rāma repeatedly draws attention to Vālmiki's *brāhminical* status:

O Fortunate and virtuous Brahmin, may it be so! I fully concur in thine irreproachable words. ...O Brahmin, though wholly convinced of her innocence, .²¹

It would be highly irrational of the Vālmikis to have regarded their spiritual leader as a *brāhmin*: it simply would not make sense. The *brāhmins* are traditionally the rigid upholders of the caste system and go to great lengths to avoid contact with low castes. Why then would the Vālmikis acknowledge a *brāhmin* as their Gurū? Their present identity as a caste group makes such a belief an important one.

A popular legend connecting Vālmikis and Sikhism is the belief that during a horse fight, Rāma was accidentally killed by his sons Lava and Kusha. Because of the children's despair on seeing their father dead, Vālmiki prepared *amrit* that was given to Rāma and others who had died; at once the dead became alive. Vālmiki's account, as narrated by his followers, describes that Vālmiki had buried the rest of the *amrit* under the ground and prophesied that the *amrit* would bear fruits in the *Kalyug*. After thousands of years, in the *Kalyug*, a pond had formed at the position where Vālmiki had buried the *amrit*. This location corresponds to that of *Harmandir Sāhib*. According to Punjabi folklore, including Vālmiki tradition, a princess named Rajnī was forced to marry a *pinglā* (a disabled leper). One day the *pinglā* put his hand into the pond, and his hand was cured. He eventually managed to dip his whole body into the pond, the effect of which was that he was totally cured. Rajnī and her husband were able to live happily as a result of Vālmiki's curative *amrit*. For a detailed depiction of this miraculous story, see the Punjabi classic film '*Dūkh Bhanjan Terā Nām*'.

Not long after the *pinglā* had been cured, Gurū Rāmdās had come across the *amrit* and laid the foundations of the holy city of Amritsar, on which *Harmandir Sāhib* was later constructed by his son, Gurū Arjan. In view of this legend the city of Amritsar is important among the Vālmikis. The Vālmikis express immense concern that Sikhs and Hindus do not acknowledge that it was the *amrit* of Vālmiki which was responsible for Gurū Rāmdās's founding of

the Holy City of the Sikhs. They believe that this historical incident is deliberately overlooked by higher *zāt* Sikhs and Hindus, who do not wish to elevate the significance of the low-caste Gurū, and his followers. Subsequently, there was an uprising among the Vālmīkis who were angered over the sequence of events filmed by Ramanand Sagar in his mega-hit televised serial of the *Rāmāyana*. The community was angered that Sagar had not shown, neither in India nor abroad, the scenes relating to the burying of the *amrit* by Vālmīki. Ramanand later justified himself by claiming that, although the scenes had been shot, transmission had stopped the series beforehand. He claimed, furthermore, that his portrayal of Rāma's saga had been based on Tulsidās' version, and not on the original.

The Social and Religious Positions of the Vālmīkis in India

Since the traditional occupation of the Vālmīkis in India, involves contact with faeces and refuse, they are regarded as being highly polluted, and polluting to, the higher classes of both Hinduism and Sikhism. Another term often used to refer to the Vālmīkis is *bhangi*: this is the term of which Dumont predominantly makes use.²² Like the Ravidāsīs, the Vālmīkis are frequently referred to as *achūt*, meaning Untouchable, thus the Vālmīkis were originally counted amongst the so-called Untouchable class: a term not now legally acceptable though still widely used. Much of the material covered on caste with regard to the Ravidāsīs in [Chapter Four](#) is also relevant to the Vālmīkis. Like other *Dalits*, colonies of Vālmīkis are often found on the outskirts of a village. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Ravidāsīs often regard the Vālmīkis as being lower than them on the hierarchical scale. In the light of Dumont's work, however, neither of these two castes are polluting to each other.²³ On the other hand, Juergensmeyer regards the Vālmīkis as the 'lowest of the Untouchable castes'.²⁴

Importantly, whereas education was once denied to them, Vālmīkis in India and the diaspora encourage the education of their children, many of whom have now prospered in academic fields. The need to educate the community as a whole was particularly voiced during my visits to Vālmīki temples and homes. Concern is expressed over the denial of education to the elder generation of Vālmīkis who had been brought up in India which has resulted in the majority of the elder generation of Vālmīkis remaining illiterate to this day. Education is seen as vital if the Vālmīkis are to assert their equal standing among other communities, both Indian and non-Indian. Education is no longer denied to the Vālmīkis, they therefore, make good use of a system that was once outrightly refused them.

A moving account of the life of a Vālmīki boy, is poignantly narrated by Mulk Raj Anand in his book entitled *Untouchable*.²⁵ Anand's account is based in the early part of the twentieth century, and illustrates the position of the

Vālmikis before the Constitution of India outlawed the practice of untouchability. However, I must reiterate, that prejudice against the lower castes continues, particularly in the villages of India. In the foreword to the book, E.M. Forster highlights the harshness by which they were treated in India. The passage reads:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them.²⁶

Anand's main character is Bakhā, a *bhangi*, who resentfully has to announce his arrival by shouting '*posh, posh*' so that any high castes avoid touching him.²⁷ This practice still exists in some of the more traditional Indian villages. My father pointed out that when he was at school in the Punjab, the Vālmiki pupils had to warn the *brāhmin* pupils of their arrival. Traditionally a Vālmiki was to carry a broom and shout out on his arrival so that others may be warned of his 'polluting presence'.²⁸ It is disturbing to read of how, when Bakhā and his sister, Sohini, enter a temple, they are cursed for having defiled the other attendants.²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that when treated in the manner illustrated by Anand, the Vālmikis spoke out against the oppression they faced for centuries. Not all *chūhrās*, however, are followers of Vālmiki. Large numbers also converted to Christianity. A minute number who converted to Sikhism remain *mazhabīs*. Nevertheless, the majority prefer being referred to as Vālmikis.

The origin of the Vālmikis as a community can be traced back to the early 1920s, probably as an influence of the *Ad Dharm*, which is discussed in detail in [Chapter Four](#). Prior to their heralding of Vālmiki as Gurū, the *mazhabīs* had endeavoured to improve their position in Indian society by converting to the apparently egalitarian Sikh faith. Like the Ravidāsīs however, the *mazhabī* Sikhs were discriminated against because of their low *zāt*. For example, during the early twentieth century they were not allowed to prepare the *laṅgar*, and many higher-caste Sikhs would refuse to sit next to Vālmikis during the communal meal. This is, indeed, a blatant contradiction of *gurbāṇī*. Although Gurū Nānak and succeeding Sikh Gurūs continually emphasized the irrelevance of caste distinctions among the *Panth*, it is with Gurū Gobind Singh that the presence of the so-called Untouchables became more noticeable among the *Panth*. Gurū Nānak taught that caste had no bearing on the individual's quest for liberation, he stressed:

Recognise Lord's light within all and inquire not the caste, as there is no caste in the next world. (AG 349)³⁰

Gurū Nānak further emphasized that all are equal in the eyes of God:

The four castes of warriors, priests, farmers and menials are equal partners in divine instruction. (AG 747)³¹

Ultimately, the *mazhabīs* were no better off as Sikhs than if they had remained trapped in the Hindu caste system. I would say they were in a deeper conflict within themselves by turning to Sikhism. Unjust as it was, Hindu law books *openly* sanctioned discrimination against the Vālmīkis. Sikh *teachings* however, repeatedly condemned their mistreatment and taught that they were equal, whereas *in practice* Sikhs were openly disobeying the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* by perpetuating stringent caste discrimination. This must have been a bitter disappointment to the Vālmīkis, as was the case with the Ravidāsīs.

Another move by Vālmīkis wishing to improve their social stance was by converting to Christianity. Noticeably, of all the Indian Christians, the majority percentage is made up by the former *Dalits*. Mass conversions took place between 1880 and the 1940s.³² The attraction of the Christian faith for the lower classes was that it taught equality for all in the eyes of God, and promoted the education of the lower *zāts*. The *Ārya Samāj* was in part a response to the Christian missionaries in India. By then, Christianity had managed to convert many individuals from the lower classes, Dayananda's main objective was to 'reclaim' the converts by preaching that the *Ārya Samāj* had no place for caste distinctions. Many Christian converts were brought back to Hinduism by the *shuddi*, purification rite. In the long run, however, the *Ārya Samāj* did not succeed in re-converting the lower castes, since a large number continue to be Christians today.

As mentioned earlier, the Punjabi movement of the Vālmīkis was probably influenced by the *Ad Dharm*. This view is supported by Juergensmeyer, who has remarked that the Vālmīki movement could be 'regarded as a direct replacement for the Ad Dharm'.³³ Many *mazhabīs* had initially become members of the *Ad Dharm*, though for a short period only.³⁴ Since the members of the *Ad Dharm* had predominantly taken Ravidās as their *Ādi Gurū*, the Vālmīkis eventually formed their own Vālmīki Sabhā, taking Vālmīki, the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and a member of their own *zāt*, as their religious founder. This, as Juergensmeyer highlights, 'served as an appropriate symbol of lower-caste cultural integrity as well as a link with the high tradition'.³⁵

Significantly, the first reference to the Vālmīki Sabhā was made as early as 1910.³⁶ Furthermore, around this time, the *Ārya Samāj* encouraged the development of the Vālmīki community due to its Hindu appearance and social customs. It was also the *Ārya Samāj* that encouraged the promotion of *ṛṣi* Vālmīki,³⁷ and promoted an awareness of the Vālmīkis so that more and more Vālmīkis would remain in the so-called Hindu fold rather than convert to Islam or Christianity in the hope of finding equality. It was not long however, before the Vālmīki Sabhā began distancing itself from the *Ārya Samāj*, probably as a result of attempts by the *Ārya Samāj* leaders to control the affairs of the Sabhā.

Also, the *Ārya Samāj* is translated as the ‘Society of the Aryans’; surely the *ādivāsīs* were unable to fit into this context? Although the early Vālmīki Sabhā retained contacts with the *Ad Dharm*, a distinction between the two low-caste movements always remained.³⁸ The most obvious distinction was that the Vālmīki Sabhā promoted Mahārṣi Vālmīki as its *Ādi Gurū*, whereas the *Ad Dharm* promoted Gurū Ravidās as its *Ādi Gurū*: both movements were similar, however, in their determination to strive for religious and social improvement.

After India gained independence, the working conditions for Vālmīkis have generally improved. This is probably a result of the joint efforts of the Sweeper’s Union³⁹ and the Vālmīki Sabhā. The former was established by the Vālmīkis not long after the Vālmīki Sabhā. Whereas the Vālmīki Sabhā was primarily concerned with religious improvement, the Sweepers’ Union was concerned with the social uplifting of the Vālmīkis. Increasingly, the Vālmīkis, along with the Ravidāsīs, are moving out of agriculture, which is an aspect of Punjabi life dominated by the *jaṭ* Sikhs and where discrimination has traditionally taken a stronghold. In their place, members of the peasant castes from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who are referred to as *bhaiyās*,⁴⁰ are being employed.

Today the followers of Vālmīki resent being called *chūhrā*; they are Vālmīkis, who are to be treated equally with all Indians in India and the diaspora. In their veneration of Mahārṣi Vālmīki as their Gurū, the Vālmīkis have shown clearly that they are no longer going to be pushed aside as low-caste Sikhs or Hindus. In modern society they have their own religious system and their own temples in which no other than a Vālmīki has the right to dictate what should and should not be done. This is a great achievement when one bears in mind that there was a time when entry to temples was denied to the Vālmīkis.

The Metaphysics of the Vālmīkis

The majority of the beliefs held by the Vālmīki community originate from the *Yoga Vasīṣṭha*, and not the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. At present, the Vālmīkis are in the process of making the *Yoga Vasīṣṭha* openly available to the community by translating it into Punjabi. Vālmīkis envisage that this translation will then be used in all their places of worship worldwide. When widely used the *Yoga Vasīṣṭha* will probably take on more significance than readings from the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself. This matter is expressed to the Vālmīki community via the *Vālmīk Jagrītī*: ‘Let us unite to create a Yoga Vasistha in simple Punjabi. This will be read in all Vālmīki Religious places and homes and will be a guide to every one who reads it. Until we all read from one holy book, we cannot unite’.⁴¹ Even in the very few Vālmīki centres that house a copy of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* for its *mazhabī* Sikh members, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is read from only once a month. For the rest of the time it is the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* that is

used during worship. In the *sabhās* that house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, it is the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* that is the basis for the philosophical teachings of the community as a whole. Notably, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is not found in the overwhelming majority of Vālmiki *sabhās*, or *bhawans* as they are occasionally referred to.

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is very specific concerning who can read its philosophy. The text is intended for those who aspire to achieve liberation and wish to gain knowledge about reality. It is not for one who is totally ignorant, neither for one who already has gained knowledge about the true Self. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* expresses this point explicitly in its following words: ‘He is entitled to (study) this scripture, who has the firm belief, “I am bound; let me be liberated”, who is not much ignorant, and not wise either’.⁴² The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* conveys the belief that the Sage Vasiṣṭha, whose dialogue with Rāma is the basis of the text, was divinely appointed by the God Brahmā to help liberate the people of India. The main concepts of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* are important in order to assess their implications for the issue of the identity of the Vālmikis.

Reality

The over-riding emphasis of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is its exposition of the theory of *advaita*, non-duality/monism. Overall, there are no monistic teachings to be found within the metaphysics of Sikhism. Monism is a feature of one of the Hindu schools of thought, that of *advaita vedānta* which, in its present form, is traced back to Śaṅkara, whose dates are traditionally around 788–820 CE. Śaṅkara’s teachings are derived from the *Upaniṣads*. While Sikhism teaches that the essence of God dwells within the heart of each human being, and in this sense each human is divine, it is important to note that the essence is not the Absolute Itself. Although, according to Sikh philosophy, the individual is inseparable from God, a distinction between the soul and God always remains. So, although the individual soul, according to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is totally dependent on God, the realization of which is a prerequisite on the path towards *mukti*, there is no concept that the individual soul actually *becomes* the Absolute: in this sense a duality will remain at *mukti* between the soul and the Absolute, *Wāhegurū*. This is essentially *nirguṇa*, beyond the three *guṇas*, the qualities that characterize a being. The theory of *advaita* is therefore much more in line with Hindu monistic traditions.

The great philosopher of *advaita*, Śaṅkara himself, as well as the authors of many passages of the *Upaniṣads*, are believed to have been influenced by the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*.⁴³ The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that the world is in actual fact an illusion, *māyā*, it only exists via the imagination of the ignorant being who is ignorant in the sense that one is unaware that only *Brahman*, the Absolute exists. Therefore, in reality, there is no such entity as an individual soul or self, everything is *Brahman* in which no dualities exist. For the wise person, who has realized the truth, the world is seen as mere amusement:

The entire world is perceived with amusement as jugglery by a person endowed with reflection, free from fever and possessed of a cool mind, having abandoned all this cage of mental agony like the worn-out skin (abandoned) by a snake.⁴⁴

The wise ones have realized the monistic nature of reality; to them the world is as though a dream:

Firmly convinced of non-duality and enjoying perfect mental peace, yogis go about their work seeing the world as if it were a dream.⁴⁵

It is only the knowledge of *Brahman-ātman*, that is that the soul within is *Brahman*, there is no individuality and everything is *Brahman*, which is true realization of reality: this is what the wise person, the *jīvanmukt*, has realized. Any other knowledge is merely illusory. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* states the following with regard to what real knowledge is:

(The Wise) understand Self-knowledge (alone) as knowledge. On the contrary, those other knowings are (only) false knowledge on account of non-perception of the real truth (or the essence).⁴⁶

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*'s perception of reality as monistic is, as remarked earlier, in sharp contrast to the dualism of Sikh teachings.

Whereas the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* views knowledge as overcoming the grand illusion, that is, *māyā*, where the created world is a mere product of the mind, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* asserts that the world is real, it has been created by God. However, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* accepts *māyā* in the sense that it is the false attachments to the world that result in a separation from God. Reality, according to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is different from the conception of it in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, for the former teaches that true realization consists of acknowledging one's love for God, *dualistically*. An existence without God will lead to further entrapment in *saṃsāra*. The need to overcome attachment to *māyā* is repeatedly stressed by Gurū Nānak.⁴⁷

The philosophy of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that each mind produces a different perception of the world, thus in this sense one cannot paint a generalized picture of what the illusion depicts to the ignorant. This point is summarized in the following verse:

The illusion of the world is produced in every mind differently and severally.⁴⁸

The fact that the world is like a dream, or a void, is emphasized over and over again:

That visible object is indeed not absolute till it is our object of experience. We (as experiencing individuals) and this (visible) world are just clear void. As that (void or dream-world) is, so is the entire (world).⁴⁹

According to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, the world in which we live, nevertheless, is *real* in the sense that we operate within it. But it is not *actually* created as it is

according to Sikh philosophy. It is the enlightened *ātman* that is no longer affected by the grand illusion. *Māyā*, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, therefore, is, perceived as *real* by those who are on the lower level, that of *avidyā*. Those on the higher level of truth have realized it is only *nirguṇa Brahman* that exists.

The Self

Since reality, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, is monistic, the Self (*ātman*) is *Brahman*. As long as the ‘visible object’ that is illusion exists, the liberation of the Self into its true being that is *Brahman*, cannot occur. Therefore, the aim is to overcome the illusory lures of the mind and realize the true Self:

The world, you, I and the like of false nature are called “the visible object.” As long as it arises (or exists), so long there is no liberation.⁵⁰

So how does one manage to overcome *māyā* and realize the true nature of the Self? How is knowledge obtained? This is possible only when the ego and attachment to worldly pleasures are subjugated. This will occur via the path of *jñāna yoga* whereby true realization of the Self as *Brahman* is perceived. Thus, in this context there is no scope for any feelings of individuality.

Clearly, the orientation of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, which forms the basis for Vālmiki belief, is not in line with Sikh teachings, in this case Vālmiki beliefs are more akin to Hindu philosophy. Sikhism stresses liberation through *bhakti yoga*. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* on the other hand, promotes *jñāna yoga*, which is the *only* way to overcome duality.

Attachment and Ego

It is ignorance that causes the Self to be trapped in the continuous cycle of *saṃsāra*. In line with Sikhism, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* also teaches that it is *only* those who have shunned ignorance who will achieve *mukti*:

Rāma! Men of lofty intellect have crossed over, in a moment, the ocean of worldly existence which is difficult to be crossed, merely by the raft which is the application of knowledge.⁵¹

When one becomes attached to worldly life, an attachment to the desires associated with it also ensues. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that, in the case of the ignorant being, an attachment is formed to this illusion which would be inimical to the path of liberation.⁵² Like the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*’s concept of the *gurmukh*, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that once the ego has been overcome, desire for worldly pleasures, including attachment, will also be conquered. Then and only then will an individual be on the way towards liberation:

When the mind has become tranquil and has given up the desire for enjoyment and when the burning of attachment of the entire group of senses (to worldly

objects) has been accomplished, the pure words of the preceptor rest in the mind (of the disciple) as drops of water coloured by saffron (settle) on a pure white cloth.⁵³

Thus, only the *gurmukh* has the possibility of *mukti*.

The concept of *ahaṃkāra* is reminiscent of the concept of *haumai*, found in the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs. The *haumai* is the ego, the producer of separateness. It causes the individual to believe that one is not dependent on *Satgurū* for survival. The effect of *ahaṃkāra*, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, is that it causes an illusion on the part of the ignorant being, who perceives *Brahman* as the ‘other’ instead of the true Self. Thus the effect of both *ahaṃkāra* and *haumai* is that the individual forms attachments to worldly things that result in entrapment in *saṃsāra*.

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* broaches steps that are to be taken for one aspiring to achieve liberation. One way is by associating with the *satsaṅgat*, that is, keeping the company of good, wise people, who will influence the aspirant.⁵⁴ Since the *satsaṅgat* is composed of those with tranquil mind and heart, this reflects the real nature of one’s true Self, therefore enabling one to be in harmony with reality.⁵⁵ Thus, it appears that the *satsaṅgat* is of more value than the practice of austerities and rituals. In this respect, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is very much in line with Sikh philosophy which accentuates keeping the company of *Sants*, good people (AG 598). This rejection of rituals raises an interesting point. If Vālmīki is the author of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, then why would he devalue external rituals such as pilgrimages, austerities and religious sacrifices in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand uphold them in the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa*? The *Rāmāyaṇa* is pervaded with accounts of sages performing severe austerities, and accounts of King Dasaratha and his sons performing sacrifices, in particular the *aśvamedha*, the horse sacrifice.

To solve this apparent confusion, one must return again to *advaita* philosophy. Basically, ignorant beings are on the lower level of understanding. They perceive *Brahman* as *saguṇa*, thereby forming a personal relationship with It in the form of deities, particularly *Īśvara*. *Īśvara*, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, is mere illusion, a product of the mind which is responsible for producing perceptions. This level is necessary nevertheless, to allow the consciousness to evolve, in order to be able to reach the higher level where it is only *nirguṇa Brahman* that is reality:

Devotion to God Viṣṇu is invented for the sake of the progress (or employment) in the auspicious state of (Self-knowledge), of foolish persons running away from scriptural injunction, effort and reflection (or investigation).⁵⁶

It is *jñāna yoga* whereby realization that transcends ordinary consciousness to the higher level becomes possible. This is, therefore, opposed to *bhakti yoga* that is practised by those on the lower level, the level of ignorance. So, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is best understood by those who have managed to rise above the lower

level and discard the *Rāmāyana* as now insufficient on the path towards reality. Vālmikis nevertheless utilize both the *Rāmāyana* and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, and collectively refer to both scriptures as the *Mahārāmāyana*. Here, it is likely that Vālmiki philosophy follows Hindu *advaita* belief in accepting a higher and lower level of approaches to the divine.

Four stages on the path to liberation in Śaiva Hinduism can be employed to further clarify the two levels of reality.⁵⁷ The four stages, which are evolutionary, incorporate both the lower and higher levels of reality. The lower level needs to be transcended before the aspirant can progress to the higher level. The path of enlightenment is divided into the four stages of:

- 1 *charyā* – virtue and selfless service;
- 2 *kriyā* – worship in the form of *bhakti yoga*;
- 3 the stage of *yoga* – meditation;
- 4 *jñāna* – ‘the wisdom state of the realized soul’.

Subramuniyaswami stresses the point that ‘the four *pādas* [stages] are not alternative ways, but progressive, cumulative phases of one path’.⁵⁸ The *ātman* may pass through many countless births before the final state is realized. These four stages basically correspond to the approaches to God in the *Rāmāyana* and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. The first and second stages are concerned with *bhakti yoga* that must, in the third and fourth stages, be transcended by *jñāna yoga*. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that knowledge about the Self is also to be obtained through meditation: this is the third stage in the Hindu context. Meditation, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is geared towards the inner Self that is the Absolute.⁵⁹ The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* further recommends that when practising meditation, the mantra *OM* should be used. This is to be accompanied by *prāṇayāma*, breathing techniques, used by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains for the evolution of the consciousness of the Self.⁶⁰ Together, these practices will enable one to obtain knowledge of the true Self. Since it is the true essence within that is being meditated on, there is no scope for image worship or for invocations through *mantars*.

God

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* expounds the theory of *nirguṇa Brahman* that is within, and therefore physically indescribable. It teaches:

The worship of God consisting of artificial worship (of idols and the like) is declared for those who have intellects which are not perfected and who indeed have undeveloped and delicate minds. On account of his being of the nature of perception (or sensation) situated within the reach of everybody, nothing whatever such as invocation or Mantra-s (or sacred formulae), is employed for him.⁶¹

Atreya, in the above, has misleadingly translated the term ‘him’ for the Absolute. Since *Brahman* is *nirguṇa*, It has no gender or form and is thus expressed as *Tat*, meaning ‘That’, hence the *Upaniṣadic* utterance of *Tat Tvam Asi* ‘That Thou Art’. Another important discrepancy is that the concept of *avatārs*, in this case of Rāma, does not fit in with the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* concept of *nirguṇa Brahman*. However, it is well to remember that the concept of Rāma as an *avatār* is not prominent in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, for here the main character is very much a human being. It is the later adaptations of Vālmīki’s narrative, that is, the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Rāmācaritāmānas* of Tulsidās that extol the concept of Rāma as an *avatār* of Viṣṇu. This, then, would partially remove the difficulty of compromising a concept of *nirguṇa Brahman*. The Vālmīkis, therefore, have no specific orientation towards Rāma; if pictures of him are present then these will be in relation to his involvement with Mahārṣi Vālmīki only. In accordance with the teachings of Vālmīki, the community does not offer *bhakti* to Rāma. Therefore, the concept of *avatārs* is not acceptable given the *nirguṇa* concept of the divine; this again is in line with Sikh thought. In the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* itself, there is no mention, in the dialogue between Rāma and the Sage Vasiṣṭha, of the importance of Rāma as an *avatār*. Therefore, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* views such worship to *saguṇa* forms of the Absolute as being secondary to meditation on one’s inner Self, which is *Brahman*. This, as I have already indicated, is similar to Sikh teachings that emphasize interiorized religion. Since the essence of the divine is within, no outward ritualism or devotion to images is needed. But the tenor of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole suits a Vedic conception of a plurality of deities and not a monistic Absolute.

According to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* theory of *nirguṇa Brahman*, however, there is no scope for a personal God. It has to be said, however, that humanity at large cannot cope with this idea of a totally transcendent Absolute, it needs some tangible aspect on which to focus. Thus the concept of God in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is quite different to the practices and beliefs concerning God that preside among the majority of Vālmīkis. This is no less obvious in Sikhism where *Tat*, the indescribable Absolute, is referred to as ‘God’ by the *Panth*.

Vālmīki is commonly referred to as *Bhagwān Vālmīk Jī* by his followers. Notably, Gurū Nānak is also referred to as Gurū Nānak Dev Jī since he is seen as the preceptor who has the purpose of guiding humanity towards *mukti*. Furthermore, even though outward devotion is seen as secondary, and the *nirguṇa* concept of God underpins the religion, Vālmīkis offer *bhakti* to Vālmīki, who is *Bhagwān* for them. Here, there is a good deal to suggest, tentatively, a divinisation of Vālmīki by his followers, an almost monotheistic devotion. On the other hand, Vālmīkis also stress that the Supreme God for them is the *nirguṇa brahm*, *Brahman*. This term, *brahm*, used by the Vālmīkis, is Hindu in character. The phrase *Wohi Ek Brahm*, ‘That One God’ which is recited by Vālmīkis praises the formless God, but the same incantation proceeds to praise *Vālmīk Bhagwān Kī Jai*, ‘Victory to God Vālmīki’. This illustrates the

contradiction between theory and practice superbly. However, although Vālmiki is referred to as *Bhagwān*, he is not to be regarded as an *avatār*, that is, *saguṇa Brahman*, in the same way as Rāma or Kṛṣṇa. According to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* all humans are ultimately *Brahman*, in the same way as Vālmiki is. However, since Vālmiki has realized *Brahman*, this puts him in a special position as having ultimate knowledge that can be passed on to others. Thus he is *Bhagwān* to his followers and will enable them, too, to realize the truth about the real Self. This elevation of Vālmiki to the status of *Bhagwān* is strictly against *gurbāṇī*, and compromises any attempts to suggest a Sikh leaning of the Vālmikis.

Nevertheless, the concept of God in both Vālmiki and Sikh theology has clear similarities. The basic creed of Sikhism, the *Japī*, refers to the Ultimate as *Akal Murat* and *Ajūnī*: immortal and beyond births and deaths. In *gurbāṇī*, the *nirguṇa Brahman* became *saguṇa* in order that It may be loved by humanity. Ultimately, however, God remains *nirguṇa*, totally formless and incomprehensible. Thus the *nirguṇa Brahman* of both the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is totally beyond the comprehension of the human mind. With regard to the *nirguṇa* nature of God, Gurū Nānak states the following:

Without seeing God, one can say not aught regarding Him. How can one describe and narrate Him, ... (AG 1256)⁶²

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, like the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* also teaches that *Brahman* has no form:

Know that as the worship of the Deity, in which the Self-god is worshipped by flowers in the form of tranquillity and awareness. The worship of a form is not worship.⁶³

Thus, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, like the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, strongly discourages any kind of worship in which the Absolute is given a form. In the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha Brahman* is one's inner Self, It has to be realized inwardly; only then is *Brahman*, one's real Self, experienced:

This One is indeed not far away, nor near. He is not unattainable; nor is he in an inaccessible place. He is of the nature of the light of one's own Bliss. He is obtained only from one's own body.⁶⁴

The *saguṇa* forms of God such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Adityā, the Sun, and Brahma are depicted by the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* as being a mere product of the consciousness of the ignorant self, and consciousness of an object, as opposed to Pure Consciousness that has no subject-object differentiation:

This Siva, wearing the moon, is mere Consciousness. Viṣṇu, the Lord of Garuḍa, is mere Consciousness. The Sun is only mere Consciousness. Brahmā, the lotus-born, is mere Consciousness.⁶⁵

Worshipping any other than the Ultimate Reality, which is the Self, will not bring liberation. The egoistic consciousness, often depicted as the *jīva*, must be overcome to transcend false perceptions of *saguṇa Brahman*. It is only by one's own efforts in inquiring about the true nature of the Self that ultimate bliss is to be obtained. Thus the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* advocates liberation through one's own efforts rather than reliance on any outside agent such as a personal God. It is *giān*, also referred to as *jñāna*, 'knowledge' about *nirguṇa Brahman*, and not *bhakti* that will bring about *mukti*. This is summarized in the following verses of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*:

The Principle of Consciousness residing in the cave of the heart is the principal and eternal form of the Self. The one with the conch, disc and the mace in the hands (i.e., the form of Viṣṇu) is the secondary form.⁶⁶

In knowing one's own Self, the principal means is investigation arising from human effort. The secondary means is divine favour and the like. Be one devoted to the principal means.⁶⁷

Like the *advaita* of Śaṅkara true knowledge is that *Brahman*, the Absolute, is Pure Consciousness:

This Consciousness here without any object to be known is that eternal Supreme Spirit (or *Brahman*). This Consciousness here, associated with the object to be known is called this knowing (or grasping of objects).⁶⁸

The verse indicates that whereas *Brahman* is Pure Consciousness, as is the true Self, it is the ego-consciousness that sees the objects of the world.

Bhakti to a personal God is foolish since, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, the aim is to become one with the Only Reality which is the Self. *Bhakti*, offered in the hope of receiving divine Grace therefore is useless for one aspiring for the truth:

This Mādhava (or Viṣṇu), even if worshipped for a long time and possessed [*sic*] of great love (for the devotees), cannot give Knowledge to one without investigation. Whatever is obtained by anybody anywhere, that is acquired by the employment of one's own power; not from another anywhere.⁶⁹

Thus, it is only by *giān* that the true Self is realized. There is no sense here of divine Grace (the Sikh *Nadar*) or the necessity for God to grant liberation, or even that one is on the path to it. Self effort is essential in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. Moreover the superiority of one's own efforts over *bhakti* is alien to Sikh theology. And yet, in *practice*, the Vālmīki community, as illustrated below, *do* offer *bhakti* to the Supreme God. So although the philosophy of *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* states that *bhakti* has no scope in monistic terms of reality, in practice the Vālmikis have overt signs of a monotheistic approach to divinity.

Karma

Unlike the hints of a concept of predestination found in Sikh teachings as mentioned in [Chapter Four](#), the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is emphatic about the idea that the past *karma* of each being is responsible for the individual's present condition. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, because of the monistic nature of its perception of reality, leaves no scope for the belief that all happens in accordance with the *Hukam*, the sovereign Will of God, which is the underlying principle of Sikh philosophy.

Vastly different from Sikh metaphysics, therefore, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* teaches that it is only by one's own actions, one's own efforts, that liberation can be realized. The following verse from the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* summarizes the need for human effort:

One's friend is oneself alone. One's enemy is oneself alone. If the self is not protected by oneself, then, there is no other means.⁷⁰

In comparison to Sikh metaphysics, the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* states that it is through the human form that Self-realization in *mukti* is possible because of the sense of discrimination and reasoning. This is identical to Sikh belief where the human birth is regarded as the highest of all births. A point of departure, nevertheless, is again apparent in the following verse of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* that compares one who is reliant on the Will of God to an animal, as the result of being on the lower level of devotion to God:

“One would go to heaven or hell impelled by God.” He (who thinks so) is ever dependent on another. He is only an animal. There is no doubt (about this).⁷¹

This is alien to Sikh belief where each being is believed to be predestined according to the *Hukam* of God. The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is adamant in its teachings that there is no such thing as predestination: it is one's past *karma* that is responsible for present circumstances. Since the concepts of *Hukam* and *Nadar* are central to Sikh teachings, any hint of a Sikh alliance of the Vālmīkis is considerably compromised as a result of the concept of *karma* found in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*.

Mukti

The nature of the state realized at *mukti* is very different in Sikh theology to that of the metaphysics of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. In the former, at death the *ātman* will reside in total bliss with *Wāhegurū*; the soul will not become *Wāhegurū*. Hence, in this sense, a duality remains at *mukti*. According to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, at liberation there is total monism, the Self exists blissfully as the Ultimate Reality, *Brahman*, or *Brahm* as the Vālmīkis call It. There is a total reabsorption into the true Self. This, as has been shown, has strong overtones

of the Hindu *advaita* system, and stands in sharp opposition to the dualism of Sikh teachings, indicating the non-Sikh orientation of the Vālmikis.

There are seven stages on the path of self-realization which is a 'gradual process which may extend to any length of time or to several lives of the individual, in accordance with the intensity of his aspiration and earnestness of his efforts'.⁷² These seven stages of knowledge are present in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*.⁷³ They appear to correspond to the four states of consciousness: the waking state, dreaming sleep, dreamless sleep and finally *turiyā*. The first two states are dualistic due to the presence of the ego that gives rise to the mind; this is described as the 'normal state of consciousness'.⁷⁴ It is with the third state that the ego is overcome. Here, since there is no mind, the consciousness cannot give rise to perceptions: it follows, thus, that dualities are overcome, resulting in the final state of liberation, *turiyā*.

Importantly, since the stages towards realization, both in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, involve the abandonment of desires, liberation is not seen as the fulfilment of a desire. Liberation is not desired, rather it is *realized* when true knowledge of the Self is found, as remarked by the author of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*:

The one bound by desire is indeed bound. Liberation would be the destruction of desires. Having completely renounced desires, you give up even the desire for liberation.⁷⁵

So, according to the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, in reality there is neither bondage nor liberation: only *Brahman* is reality.⁷⁶ The distinction between bondage and *nirvāṇa* is made only by those who are ignorant of their true state.⁷⁷

The jīvaṇmukt

The *jīvaṇmukt* who has obtained *nirvāṇa* whilst still alive, resides in the stage of *turyāga*. This being has overcome all duality and has realized that the world is a mere illusion. The *jīvaṇmukt* is the ideal according to both the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* and the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. The qualities of a *jīvaṇmukt* are depicted by the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* as follows:

He is declared as a liberated person for whom, possessed of a mind turned inward, an object of pleasure is not for pleasure (i.e., does not produce delight) and trouble is not for grief (i.e., does not produce grief).⁷⁸

The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* describes a *jīvaṇmukt* as one who, having realized that he/she cannot live as being separate from God, is liberated whilst still in the physical body and, thus, one who has lost all desires and attachments to the physical world (AG 1343). Since the Sikh concept of the divine is panentheistic, the divine is always greater than the created universe, its systems such as *karma* and *saṃsāra*, and all phenomena within it. In Sikhism, due to the sovereignty of

God, the doctrines of *Nadar* and *Hukam* override all systems, both concepts reinforcing panentheism. Hence one becomes a *jīvaṇmukt* only in accordance with the *Hukam*.

The *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* talks of two states of liberation. One is the state that the *jīvaṇmukt* has obtained, that is, liberation whilst still in the human body. The other state of liberation is that achieved at the dissolution of the physical body, whereby there is no more *saṃsāra*, and the being returns to its true state as *Brahman*.⁷⁹ But there is no spiritual distinction at all between a *jīvaṇmukt* and one who has died the physical death and achieved liberation.⁸⁰ This concept of the *jīvaṇmukt* is akin to monistic *Upaniṣadic* thought, where true realization ends all duality. At liberation, the Self does not assume any form; as the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* puts it, there is no more ‘I’ or ‘not I’:

The One liberated without a body neither appears, nor disappears, nor is extinguished. He is neither existence nor non-existence. He is not far off. He is neither “I” nor “not I”, nor another.⁸¹

Although the *jīvaṇmukt* may seem to be physically bound by the human body, he or she is spiritually free.⁸²

Caste

Given that the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* expounds *advaita*, it is to be expected that caste distinctions have no relevance since, ultimately, each being is of the essence of the One Reality. However, there is an obvious distinction between those with a lower and higher perspective of reality. Those who are of the ignorant nature will fail to perceive the Oneness of *Brahman* and, therefore, will view the differences between castes as important in the society in which they live. Caste distinctions are characteristic of those with a lower level of perception. The following verse from the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* suggests that one living in ignorance is better off living like an outcaste:

O Rama, it is indeed nobler to wander begging about the streets of the outcasts (*chandalas*), an earthen bowl in hand, than to live a life steeped in ignorance.⁸³

But, justification for caste distinctions is given in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* itself. In the epic, there are continuous references to the importance of *brāhmins* in the performance of rituals. Of most significance, and rather contradictory to the beliefs of the *Vālmīkis*, is the story relating to the death of a *brāhmin*’s son, found in *Uttarā Kandā*, chapters 73–76 of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*.⁸⁴ It seems rather strange that *Vālmīki*, the apparent author of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, would actually be promoting caste prejudice in such a manner, if he were a member of the lower *zāts*.

In their disgust of the slaying of Shambuka, the *Vālmīkis* disregard Rāma as an *avatār*. On this point, *The Service* reads as follows:

This Rama who mercilessly took away the life of Sambuka for no other fault than that he was making penance is held to be the Avatar (Incarnation) of Vishnu! If there were kings like Rama now! Alas! What would be the plight of those who are called Sudras? ⁸⁵

For the Vālmīkis, caste plays no role. In answer to my question as to what the attitude towards caste is among the Vālmīkis, I was told by a panel of Vālmīki followers that:

Valmiki community does not recognise the concept of caste. It is believed to be an evil innovation that came into being after the arrival of Aryans who were attracted to India by the richness of its land, culture and wealth.

In summary of the beliefs found among Vālmīkis, it is clear that the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* expounds the *advaita* theory, which is also found in the monism of the *Upaniṣads*, and which is very much akin to the teachings of the *advaitist* Śaṅkara. In this respect therefore, reality as taught by the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* is very different to that found in the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs. There is more of a Hindu than Sikh influence on Vālmīki theology, and this has serious implications for their Sikh identity. On the other hand, however, the majority of Vālmīkis have no desire to be labelled as Sikhs anyhow.

Prevalent Practices of the Vālmīkis

The Vālmīki temples which are often referred to as *mandirs* are very important since it is here that the community meet as followers of Vālmīki. It is also here that the younger generation is made aware of its identity and religious orientation. The Vālmīki temples have their own priests, often called *pūjārīs*: again a Hindu term. Occasionally the priests are referred to as *giānīs*, as in the case of the minute number of *sabhās* which house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Nevertheless, both the *pūjārīs* and *giānīs* emphatically claim they are Vālmīkis. In their efforts towards asserting equality, the Vālmīkis do not seek the assistance of the *brāhmins* to perform any rituals whatsoever, the message given to Vālmīkis is that they themselves will undertake all rituals, as highlighted in the *Vālmīk Jagrītī*:

7. Have our Vālmīki Pujaris perform our rituals. ⁸⁶

Worship

Worship in the majority of Vālmīki temples takes the form of reading from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Additionally, verses from the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* are reflected on in Punjabi. The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is also read from once every month on *saṅgrānd* in *sabhās* which house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* alongside the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The

service also includes the singing of *kīrtan*, usually in the praise of Vālmīki. This is followed by the *arafi* hymn and, finally, *ardās*. The *arafi* hymn and the *ardās* are prominent features of the worship, both of which take on a distinctively Vālmīki character. The opening section of the *arafi* is recited as follows:

*Wohi Ek Brahm, Wohi Ek Brahm, Vālmīk Jai Jai, Bhagwān Vālmīk Jai Jai. Satgur Vālmīk Jai Jai, Sagal Shrishti Ke Malik, Sagal Shrishti Ke Palak, Mukti Ke Ho Datā. Gurū Vālmīk Jai Jai, Swamī Vālmīk Jai Jai, Satgur Vālmīk Jai Jai,*⁸⁷

My translation of this is:

That is the One Absolute, That is the One Absolute, Victory to Vālmīk,
Victory to God Vālmīk, The Lord and Sustainer of all that is, The Lord of
liberation, Victory to Gurū Vālmīk, Victory to Swamī Vālmīk.

The reference to ‘God Vālmīk’ alongside the ‘One Absolute’ indicates that it is Vālmīki who imparts true knowledge about the Ultimate Reality.

The *ardās* recited during the commencement of the service in a Vālmīki temple is distinct from the *ardās* recited in a *gurdwārā*. The first few lines of the *ardās* clearly highlight its differentiation from the Sikh *ardās* as stated in the *Rehat Maryādā*. The Vālmīki *ardās* appears as follows and, interestingly, it illustrates an anthropomorphic nature of the divine that is quite contradictory to the conception of a totally transcendent Absolute of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*:

*Ardās Samey Bhagwān Ji Ham Hain Khade Dewar
Hath Dekar Rakhnā, Benafi Baram Bār,
Man Kī Mālā Chalti Jaye Suwas Suwas Par Nāth
Vishay Vikaron Se Prabhū Rakhnā Dekar Hath.*

At the time of *ardās* dear God we are at your doorstep
Keep us always protected, this is our request to you
Help us to continuously devour thee
Keep us protected always. (Author’s translation)

The very fact that the *ardās* is not from the *Rehat Maryādā* and has no connections whatsoever to Sikh history, clearly portrays the Vālmīki message that they are not Sikhs. The service ends with the distribution of *prasād*. If *laingar* is being served, then the congregation will eat together. Where the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is read from at each *saṅgrānd*, it is followed by the Vālmīki *arafi* and the Vālmīki *ardās*. The central Sabhā has expressed its concern over the usage of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* alongside the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This practice is against the Vālmīki Sabhā’s requirement of how things should be done in a Vālmīki place of worship (which should have no place for the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*). This specification states:

13. Vālmiki Mandirs to preach Valmikism only. A Valmiki Mandir must not have any other form of worship except *Puja and readings*, from the Ramayana and Yoga-Vasistha.⁸⁸

Celebrations

The highlight of the Vālmiki calendar of events is the birth anniversary of Vālmiki. It is celebrated on different dates by each of the Vālmiki communities. The programme is in the form of readings from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, accompanied by *kīrtan*, *arāṇ*, *ardās*, and lectures on the life of Vālmiki and the plight of the Scheduled Classes in India because of the higher-caste Sikhs and Hindus. The whole of the *Rāmāyaṇa pāth* is undertaken which usually starts a week before the day of celebration.

During the service, a particular emphasis is placed on insisting that the congregation should live as Vālmikis only, and not be caught between two faiths: that is Vālmiki and Sikh, therefore, a clear indication of the non-Sikh orientation of the community as a whole. In this respect, those *mazhabī* Sikhs who had taken initiation into the *Khālsā* are also prompted of their Vālmiki, not Sikh, identity. They are encouraged to leave Sikh practices behind. The question of remaining within Hinduism is not really an issue, since the Vālmikis were never accepted as equals in the religion that justified the prejudice against them; they do not readily call themselves Hindus in any case. The Vālmiki following is referred to as a *qaum*.

The celebration of *ḍīwālī* has a particular importance among the Vālmikis, since it originates from the epic composed by Vālmiki. It takes the form of lighting *ḍīvas* and candles both at home and in the *mandir*. The majority of Vālmikis celebrate *ḍīwālī* as the end of exile for Rāma and Sītā, and not as a commemoration of the release of Gurū Hargobind from prison.

Baisākhī is celebrated by the Vālmikis as the harvest festival of India: their overall celebration of *baisākhī* has no connection with the creation of the *Khālsā* by Gurū Gobind Singh. Interestingly, however, *sabhās* with a noticeable number of *mazhabī* Sikhs may also celebrate the birth of the *Khālsā* at *baisākhī*. The birthday of Gurū Nānak and the *shahīdī ḍīwās* (the martyrdom of Bhāi Jīwan Singh Rangretīā) is also commemorated by the same *sabhās*.

Importantly, the *nīsān sāhibs* of the Vālmiki temples are not changed on *baisākhī*, unlike Sikh practice. Rather this takes place on another celebratory day, known as Flag Day. Each centre has its own Flag Day on different dates in the year. Vālmikis also honour the birth anniversary of *Shri 108 Satgurū Giān Nāth Jī* a saint of the Vālmiki community, who is now deceased.

Vālmīki Weddings

Weddings in the Vālmīki community are performed in different ways by the various temples. It is up to the families concerned as to the way in which the couple are to be married. That is, whether they wish to have a *vedī* marriage (whereby the couple take *pheras* around the sacred fire) or whether they wish to take *pheras* around the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For the very few *sabhās* that house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, *pheras* are thus taken around both scriptures. I repeat that the central Vālmīki Sabhā dislikes the housing of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in a Vālmīki place of worship. Marriages are performed endogamously. It is permissible for a Vālmīki to marry a *mazhabī* Sikh or a Christian from one's own *zāt*. At present, efforts are being made by the Vālmīkis to standardize the wedding ceremony in order to pursue uniformity in *all* Vālmīki *sabhās*.

According to Vālmīkis overall, *vedī* marriages should take place since this was the practise in Vālmīki's period. On this matter, a Vālmīki publication entitled '*Yoga Vasīṣṭha Vich Vīyāh dā Sanklip*' has been produced and circulated among Vālmīkis in order to highlight the manner in which the *Yoga Vasīṣṭha* encourages *vedī* marriages. In accordance, the *Vālmīk Jagrītī* states that:

It is about time we do our marriages the Valmiki way. We have been getting married by either Hindu Priests or by Sikh Granthi. Our marriages must now be performed by our own Pujaris. We have to praise our Bhagwan Valmik Ji and use Shloks from his Holy Books. The marriage of Queen Chudala and King Sikhidhwaja in the Yoga-Vasistha and the marriages of Rama and his brothers in Ramayana are the types of marriages for us Valmikis. We here published a book on the marriage chapter 106 of the Yoga-Vasistha (in Punjabi).⁸⁹

The number of *pheras* in all the Vālmīki temples is four. This does not necessarily have connections to the *lāvān* hymn, but are usually taken to symbolize respect for religion, respect for the householder's life, the bearing of children and, finally, for the wife's obedience to her husband.

Layout of Vālmīki Temples

In the overwhelming majority of Vālmīki temples, emphasis is placed on Vālmīki, and the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the sole scripture used. Figure 5.1 shows the *pālṅkī* of a Vālmīki temple in which the Punjabi *Rāmāyaṇa* is housed, surrounded by pictures of Vālmīki.

In other Vālmīki temples, a life-size statue of Vālmīki is housed in the *pālṅkī*, with the *Rāmāyaṇa* being placed alongside, but outside of the *pālṅkī*. This is due to the belief that Vālmīki is more highly regarded than the *Rāmāyaṇa* that he himself composed.

Prasād and *laingar* are also served in the temples. This latter practice, I must emphasize, remains Sikh in ethos. The distribution of *prasād* on the other hand



5.1 *Pālī* of a Vālmīki temple, housing the Punjabi Rāmāyaṇa

is both a Hindu and Sikh practice. *Prasād* usually takes the form of fruit or sweets and is distributed whenever worship takes place. The decor of the walls is surrounded by pictures relating to Vālmīki, in particular, the role he plays in the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. No pictures of Sikh Gurūs are usually present. The temples are never referred to as *gurdwārās*, thus a clear avoidance of a Sikh identity.

The presidents of a number of Vālmīki temples are *kesdhārī*, however, they adamantly proclaim to the members of the Vālmīki community that they should proudly assert their identity as Vālmīkis only, and not Sikhs. Such Vālmīkis insist that the only reason they have the *kes* is because they were brought up *kesdhārī* and, therefore, have remained so. However, their religion is Vālmīki and, despite being *kesdhārī*, they have no connections with Sikhism.

As mentioned previously, there are a very minute number of Vālmīki temples that house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* alongside the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This is the case where the *saṅgat* is made up of a significant number of *mazhabī* Sikhs and is a practice that is shunned by the central Vālmīki Sabhā. The *pālī* of such a *sabhā*, housing the two scriptures, is illustrated in Figure 5.2.

Also illustrated in Figure 5.2 are representations of both Gurū Nānak and Vālmīki, again side-by-side. The representation of Gurū Nānak is placed in front of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* on the left while the representation of Vālmīki is placed in front of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the right. The fact that the temple houses a



5.2 Pūlkī of a Vālmiki temple, housing both the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*

copy of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* makes it a Sikh place of worship, since any building that installs the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* becomes a *gurdwārā*. The reader of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in Vālmiki temples does not have to be *kesdhārī*; in most cases it is a *monā*. In accordance with the *Rehat Maryādā* however, it is forbidden to install any other religious book alongside the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. On this matter the *Rehat Maryādā* states:

(e) No other book, however holy and readable, is to be installed in a Gurdwara as the Holy Guru Granth Sahib installed.⁹⁰

In actual fact, there does not appear to be any contradiction of the *Rehat Maryādā* since the Vālmiki temple is not a *gurdwārā* in the strictest sense.

With regard to identity, the installation of the two scriptures would suggest a Sikh and Vālmiki orientation. However, like the other Vālmiki centres, these *sabhās* too, talk of their identity as being Vālmiki. The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is installed for the simple matter that many members of the community had at one time been *mazhabī* Sikhs. This was the religion by which they were raised and, hence, with which they are familiar. Members of such *sabhās* insist that the essence of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is contained in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that was composed long before it. When asked about the importance given to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in Vālmiki temples, followers expressed that:

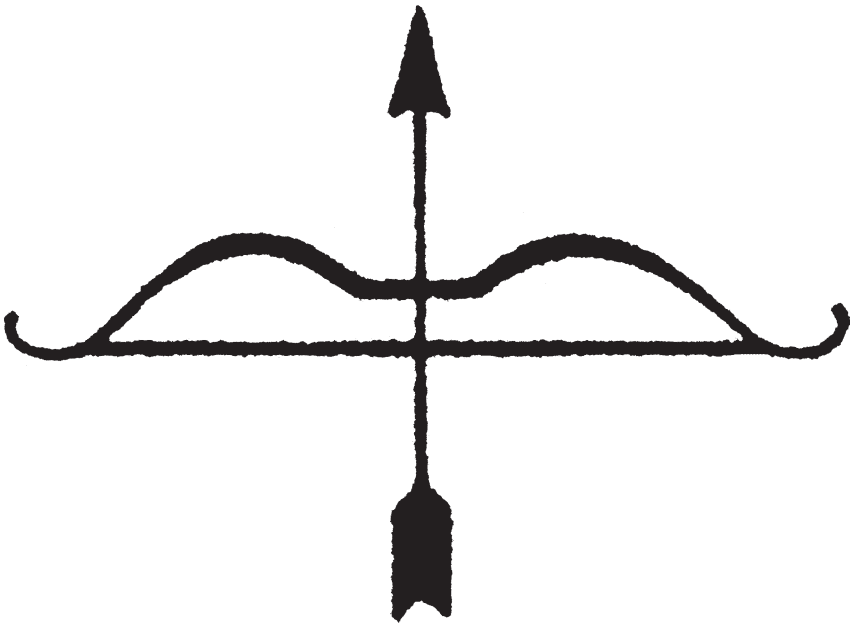
Guru Granth Sahib is also used as a Holy Scripture for worship in our temple. Basic teachings as well as philosophies in Guru Granth Sahib are also found in Holy Ramayan as well as Yog Vashisth and there are more mentions of the name Rama in Guru Granth Sahib than one can find even in Holy Ramayan.⁹¹

Nevertheless, one cannot escape the fact that the *mazhabī* Sikhs are combining aspects of two religions when attending a Vālmīki temple. Importantly, as illustrated earlier, beliefs of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* differ on a number of prominent doctrines.

Nevertheless, the Vālmīki identity of such *sabhās* is established by the fact that there is no *Ik-Onkār* or *Khaṇḍā* symbol present; like all Vālmīki centres, it is the Vālmīki symbol of the bow and arrow that is displayed. Vālmīkis assert that the bow and arrow are symbols of power and their ancient origin. The Vālmīki emblem appears as shown in [Figure 5.3](#).

The Religious Identity of the Vālmīkis

The emphasis among the majority of Vālmīkis is undoubtedly on being *different* from Sikhs. The Vālmīki Central Sabhā continuously stresses, as



5.3 The Vālmīki emblem of the bow and arrow

highlighted above, that the community should cease wandering into other religions and should be known as Vālmīkis only, thus a clear and overt expression of the community's distinctiveness. This is so, even though some Vālmīkis acknowledge some allegiance to the religions of Sikhism and Christianity. It is the retention of Sikh values however, which causes particular concern within the Vālmīki community itself. Those who remain *mazhabī* Sikhs challenge the Vālmīki sense of perception of a distinct identity. Practices of the Vālmīkis, as a whole, incorporate certain Hindu aspects, too: therefore, they have elements of both Sikhism and Hinduism. Moreover, it is the housing of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and *Rāmāyaṇa* side-by-side that is indicative of a challenge to a clear-cut definition of what a Vālmīki is.

Yet, although the Vālmīkis claim to be non-Sikhs, among the older generation there are still many *kesdhārīs*. Furthermore, the Vālmīkis themselves openly admit that their connection with Sikhism can never be lost due to the popular belief concerning Vālmīki's connection with the city of Amritsar. A relationship with Sikhism exists for the Vālmīkis at large, since many Vālmīki families in the Punjab have adopted Sikhism. During visits to the community, many youngsters frequently mention that their maternal family is *mazhabī*, and their paternal family is Vālmīki or *vice versa*. However, the identity of the particular youngsters in question is that of Vālmīki.

Although it is Hinduism that informs the religious background of the Vālmīkis, more so than Sikhism, the Hindu perception of identity among the Vālmīkis is not an issue. There is no worship of the Hindu gods or goddesses. Vālmīki is nevertheless worshipped as *Bhagwān* in the sense that he can help others towards *mukti*. In this respect, therefore, the emphasis is on the separateness from both Hindus and Sikhs with regard to a religious orientation, rather than a synthesis of cultures. Inevitably, the social background of the Vālmīkis remains Punjabi, and this will involve the retention of some common customs. Nevertheless, the Vālmīki community is not so much a synthesis, but, because of its reliance on the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, is something original, since neither Hinduism nor Sikhism rely so heavily on the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* for its religious teachings.

Underpinning all practices is the point that the Vālmīki temples, with the exception of a very few, are definitely not Sikh, for the simple reason that they do not possess a copy of the Sikh scripture: a practice that prevents their Sikh affiliation. In their efforts to create their own religion, the Vālmīkis have incorporated aspects from both Sikhism and Hinduism to create distinctiveness.⁹² Obviously religious belief and practice do not rise from a vacuum, they have to be informed by some past ideas. But it does not mean to say that their present expression needs to be seen as a synthesis of other religions, they are unique in their own way. For example, the analysis of the beliefs of the Vālmīkis has illustrated that there is not much of a reliance on Sikh doctrine.

The different Vālmīki communities are producing their own literature to educate the younger generation about their religious identity, which is Vālmīki, neither Sikh nor Hindu. Therefore, the Vālmīki community is a *zāt* based organization that aims to be separate from Sikhs and Hindus. The Vālmīkis' assertion that they are not Hindus or Sikhs is true to the extent that their practices are not wholly made up of one or the other. It is the *background* of the Vālmīkis that is Hindu and Sikh, not the actual *identity*.

The *Vālmīk Jagrītī* is responsible for promoting the Vālmīki identity as distinct, it openly declares: 'To stop wandering into different religions. Be a Valmiki and be proud of it'.⁹³ It further highlights the utmost importance of *Bhagwān* Vālmīki for his community of followers: 'Have confidence in Bhagwan Valmik Ji. Accept Bhagwan Valmik Ji as our Guru. Have a Valmiki Press to publish Valmikian research and promotion in all languages'.⁹⁴ With regard to being different from Sikhs, it is separation *from* the *Panth*, rather than *within* the *Panth*, which is of utmost importance.

A paradox of identity, however, is visibly present with regard to the *mazhabī* Sikhs and, furthermore, in relation to the practices of the very few temples that also house the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* in addition to the *Rāmāyana*. It is usually some followers from these temples who also place a marked position of importance on Bhāi Jaitā. A panel of Vālmīki followers from such a temple proudly state that:

Valmiki community feels very proud of its contribution to Sikhism both in spiritual terms as well as the struggle which lead [*sic*] to the formation of Khalsa by 10th Gurū Gobind Singh Ji. Sikh movement in India faced crisis when 9th Gurū Tegh Bahādur Ji was executed in Delhi and Bhāi Jaitā Ranghretta risked his life and managed to bring the remains of 9th Gurū (his Sees) [head] to Kiratpur where he was received by 10th Gurū Gobind Singh Ji ... Bhāi Jaitā Ranghretta, commonly known as Bābā Jiwan Singh Ji amongst Valmiki community, along with his younger brother Sangat Singh Ji played a vital role in upbringing of Gurū Gobind Singh Ji... This contribution to Sikhism by Valmiki Community, through Bābā Jaitā and Bābā Sangat Singh, was honoured by 10th Gurū by calling these brothers 'Runk rette [*sic*] mere Gurū ke bete'. This term of honour was later distorted by evil Hindu-minded Sikh followers who believed in Five Ks but did not really believe in the basic principles of Sikh-Majhab i.e. Sikh religion by calling our Sikhs as majhabis.

This view is probably due to the fact that a number of the informants are *mazhabī* Sikhs. Importantly, they nevertheless refer to themselves as Vālmīkis. But what is clear is that ties with Sikhism have not been completely severed. The prominence given to the *Rāmāyana* clearly promotes the Vālmīki identity. The same informants remark that 'Ramayan is the foundation on which our lives and the life of the community is modelled. It is our holy Scripture and our guide to way of life'.

Significantly, the problem of providing clear-cut definitions is highlighted yet again by the same informants who disliked the idea of being completely distinct from Sikhs and Hindus! They remarked:

Who says that Valmīkis are different from Hindus and Sikhs? We would like to know. We see ourselves as Valmīkis. Hindu and Sikh are extension (*sic*) to our perception as Valmīkis. This is the reason why we find harmony amongst the members of our community irrespective of their religious beliefs.

The paradox of identity therefore, is only present among *mazhabī* Sikhs. For other Vālmīkis (apart from those who converted to Christianity) their religious identity is Vālmīki alone, they have no connection with the Sikh faith and no desire to be labelled as Sikhs.

Nevertheless, since the *mazhabī* Sikhs also aspire to live according to the teachings of Mahārṣi Vālmīki, they must be regarded as being Vālmīki. The retention of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* does not suggest that the whole community is Sikh, since it is the teachings of the *Rāmāyaṇā* and *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* that are used as guidelines and not the teachings of the Sikh scripture. In this respect therefore, the underlying identity of *mazhabī* Sikhs is also Vālmīki. Thus, identity is something to be ascertained from *within* a group and not from ill-informed external perspectives.

The four groups highlighted in this book thus far, namely the Gurū Nānak Nishkān Sewak Jathā, the Nāmdhāris, the Ravidāsīs and the Vālmīkis have all been of Punjabi origin. It is commonly assumed that all Sikhs are Punjabis. However, this is not the case. In [Chapter Five](#) I highlight the implications that non-Punjabi converts to the Sikh faith have for the issue of Sikh identity.

Notes

¹ McLeod, W.H. (1976) *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 103.

² For a detailed study of the origin of the *mazhabīs* see Ashok, S.S. (1980) *Mazhabī Sikhān Dā Itihās*, Amritsar: Jaspal Printing Press. This term in its literal sense is used to refer to the *chūhrā* members who converted to Sikhism; it is, however, sometimes used to refer to both *chūhrā* and *chamār* converts.

³ Information from Dr Hew McLeod.

⁴ See Coward, H. (1988) *Sacred Word and Sacred Text*, New York: Orbis Books, p. 108; Sankalia, H.D. (1982) *The Ramayana in Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Macmillan India, p. 7.

⁵ See Shastri, H.P. (1985 edn) *The Ramayana of Valmiki: Vol 1*, London: Shanti Sadan, p. xv.

⁶ See Fowler, Jeaneane (1997) *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, p. 18; and Whaling, F. (1980) *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 15.

⁷ Shastri, in his foreword to *World within the Mind* (1997 6th imp.) London: Shanti Sadan, states that Vālmīki is the author of the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. Shastri's work translates and summarizes extracts from the original Sanskrit *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* of Vālmīki.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

⁹ See Tapasyananda, S. (1985) *Adhyatma Ramayana*, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, pp. iv–v.

- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 87.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.
- ¹² Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 3701.
- ¹³ Soba, P.L. in *Valmiki Jagriti* (1998 issue) Southall: Shri Guru Valmiki Sabha, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ *The Service*, vol. 1, Issue 1, October 1982, Birmingham: Design and Print Services, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ The *Rāmāyana* itself, more specifically in its first and seventh books, provides evidence that Vālmiki met with Rāma (*Uttara Kanda*, chapter 96), that he looked after Sitā (ibid., chapter 49), and that it was Vālmiki who brought up Lava and Kusha: teaching them to sing the whole saga of Rāma (ibid., chapters 93–94). However, it must be remembered that Books One and Seven are probably later additions, thus presenting problems with regard to the dates of Vālmiki.
- ¹⁶ *The Ramayana of Valmiki, Bala Kanda*, chapter 3, translator Shastri.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. Yet, although Vālmiki's initial knowledge of Rāma was cited by Narada, the *Rāmāyana* itself suggests that Vālmiki and Rāma had met during the latter period of Vālmiki's life. For instance, Vālmiki presents Sitā before Rāma, and proclaims her virtue (ibid., *Uttara Kanda*, chapter 96).
- ¹⁸ *Valmiki Jagriti*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ See Goldman, R.P. (1984) *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 29.
- ²⁰ Altekar, G.S. (1987) *Studies on Valmiki's Ramayana*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, p. 3.
- ²¹ *The Ramayana of Valmiki, Uttara Kanda*, chapter 97, translator Shastri.
- ²² Dumont, L. (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus*, Chicago: The University of Chicago, pp. 135–36, 360.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 135.
- ²⁴ Juergensmeyer, M. (1982) *Religion as Social Vision*, California: University of California Press, p. 169.
- ²⁵ Anand, M.R. (1940) *Untouchable*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. vi.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 50–51.
- ²⁸ Ghurye, G.S. (1994 rp of 1986) *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p. 12.
- ²⁹ Anand, *Untouchable*, p. 61.
- ³⁰ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 1164.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 2437.
- ³² Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*, p. 185.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 169.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 170.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 171.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid., pp. 173–79.
- ⁴⁰ Ballard, R. 'Migration in a wider context: Jullundur and Mirpur compared' in *New Community*, 11 (1983): 123–24.
- ⁴¹ *Valmiki Jagriti*, p. 27.
- ⁴² *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 29, translator Atreya.
- ⁴³ Atreya, B.L. (1966) *The Yogavasiṣṭha and its Philosophy*, Moradabad: Darshana Printers, p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 138, translator Atreya.
- ⁴⁵ *Yoga Vasishtha Sara*, 10, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 139, translator Atreya.
- ⁴⁷ 'The false mammon-worshipper likes not the truth. Bound to duality, he comes and goes' (AG 109). *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 362.

⁴⁸ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 329, translator Atreya.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1598.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 198–99.

⁵⁴ 'Contentment, company of the good (or the virtuous), reflection (or investigation of the Truth) and tranquillity – only these are the means of men in crossing over the ocean of worldly existence' (*ibid.*, 201).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1667.

⁵⁷ Subramuniyaswami, S.S. (1993) *Dancing with Śiva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, India and USA: Himalayan Academy, pp. 107–15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 1691, translator Atreya.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2007–09.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1682–83.

⁶² *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 4143.

⁶³ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 1688, translator Atreya.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1678.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1677.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1713.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1715.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1672–3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷² Atreya, *The Yogavasiṣṭha and its Philosophy*, pp. 55–6.

⁷³ 1. *Śubhecchā* – virtuous desire to transcend *samsara*. 2. *Vicāraṇā* – investigation or reflection into the nature of the Self. 3. *Tanumānasā* – the illusions of the mind become less affective to the aspirant. 4. *Sattvāpatti* – when the sense of Pure Being has been attained. 5. *Asamsakti* – attachment to worldly objects is overcome. 6. *Padārthābhāvanī* – the illusion is overcome. 7. *Turyagā* – Oneness as *Brahman* is fully realized. This stage is *nirvana*, or liberation. (*The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 2095–102, translator Atreya).

⁷⁴ Billington, R. (1997) *Understanding Eastern Philosophy*, London: Routledge, p. 35.

⁷⁵ *The Vision and the Way of Vasiṣṭha*, 1986, translator Atreya.

⁷⁶ Thus for the wise one, there is no desire to be liberated from any bondage, since there is no such thing.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1645, translator Atreya.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2296.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1627–9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1630.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2452.

⁸² *Yoga Vasishtha Sara*, 16, p. 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 26, p. 3.

⁸⁴ *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, 2306, translator Shastri. The story narrates how a *brāhmin*'s son has died as the consequence of a *śūdra*, by the name of Shambuka, having been practising austerities. It is only when Rāma slays Shambuka that the son is brought back to life. Thus, the original epic itself upholds caste privileges by devaluing the practice of austerities by a *śūdra*. It must be noted, however, that the first and last books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are later additions.

⁸⁵ *The Service*, vol. 1, Issue 9, August 1983, p. 17.

⁸⁶ *Valmik Jagriti*, 3rd Issue, p. 6.

⁸⁷ See also [Figure A.11](#) in the Appendix.

⁸⁸ *Valmik Jagriti*, 3rd Issue, p. 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹⁰ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada*, (1978) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 6.

⁹¹ Shackle has indicated that in the hymns of Gurū Nānak, found in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the term Rāma occurs 285 times, see Shackle, C. (1995 rp of 1981 edn) *A Gurū Nānak Glossary*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, p. 254.

⁹² Nesbitt, E. 'Valmiki in Coventry: The Revival and Reconstruction of a Community' in Ballard, R. (1994) *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, London: Hurst and Company, p. 117.

⁹³ *Valmik Jagriti*, p. 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Chapter 6

Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere

There is an increasingly non-Punjabi, western following of the Sikh faith. These Sikhs are referred to as *gorā Sikhs*, literally, ‘white Sikhs’ and is a term used to distinguish between Sikhs of Indian origin and non-Indian origin. Therefore, a *gorā* Sikh is a white person who has become a Sikh. Although the feminine term is *gorī*, white male and female Sikhs are collectively referred to as *gorā* Sikhs. The *gorā* Sikhs associate themselves with what is known as the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, many of them also belonging to the 3HO (Happy, Holy, Healthy Organization). It is in the United States of America that *gorās* of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere are most prominent.

Importantly, at times, the 3HO and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere are regarded as one group: any distinction becomes blurred. At other times, however, the distinction between the two is quite marked. Although the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere is Sikh orientated, the 3HO is not necessarily a Sikh group, even though both groups were founded by Harbhajan Singh Puri, also known as Yogī Bhajan, who was a Punjabi Sikh. The 3HO places an emphasis on *kuṇḍalinī yoga* which is personified by the coiled snake, as *śaktī* (energy), lying dormant at the base of one’s spine. The aim through *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is to awaken this *śaktī* by which it travels up the six *cakras*, or nerve centres, until it reaches the crown of the head, bringing spiritual enlightenment. The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, although also laying an emphasis on *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, also concentrates on Sikh *dharma*: the religious teachings and practices of Sikhism. *Gorā* Sikhs resent the idea that they are in any way different to other Sikhs of the *Panth*. They continuously stress that they are not members or followers of a particular group or sect, but are Sikhs.

The majority of *gorā* Sikhs have converted to Sikhism, rather than being born into the faith like the majority of Punjabi Sikhs worldwide today, who are Sikhs by birth and not necessarily by personal choice. This factor, as illustrated below, has important implications for the practice of *Khālsā* Sikhism and therefore, Sikh identity.

Harbhajan Singh Puri

Puri, who was born in 1929, is the so-called Chief Religious and Administrative Authority for Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere and belonged to the

khatrī zāt of Sikhs. His family originate from the region of the Punjab that is now situated in Pakistan. After partition the family had settled in New Delhi and it was at Delhi airport that Puri worked as a customs official before leaving for America.¹ Eventually, Puri began teaching *kuṇḍalinī yoga* classes to Americans in 1968, hence becoming widely known as Yogī Bhajan. Attracting an increasing number of yoga students resulted in Yogī Bhajan's official formation of the 3HO, the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, in 1969. Bhajan's insistence on Sikh teachings was not all that apparent in the early years, although he quite frequently talked about his faith to the yoga students.² His closest followers began to express an interest in Sikhism. Thus, it is clear that Yogī Bhajan's own Sikh background eventually resulted in the Sikh nature of the formation of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere.

In 1971, Yogī Bhajan took a group of 84 of his closest students to the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Apparently, it was due to his success in promoting Sikhism to American *gorās* that Yogī Bhajan had made claims of being bestowed with the title of Siri Singh Sāhib, an honorific term, by the Shromānī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) at the *Akal Takht*. Importantly, the involvement of the *Akal Takht* strengthens the *gorā* converts' assertion of a Sikh identity. But there is some ambiguity over whether the term *was* actually conferred by the SGPC. The *gorā* Sikhs firmly hold that the administrator of Sikhism in the Western Hemisphere is a Siri Singh Sāhib, as voiced in a pamphlet published by the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere:

On March 3rd, 1971, Harbhajan Singh was given the ministerial responsibility for the Sikhs of the Western Hemisphere by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.). In acknowledgment of his extraordinary missionary effort, he was given the title of 'Siri Singh Sahib' by Sant Chanan Singh, the President of the S.G.P.C. A few years later he was honoured with the title of 'Bhai Sahib' by the Akal Takhat.³

This belief is strengthened by Shanti Kaur Khalsa, a *gorā* Sikh, who has also remarked that the title of Siri Singh Sāhib was, indeed, accorded to Yogī Bhajan on 3 March 1971, at Amritsar.⁴

In contradiction, however, an article in a copy of the journal *Time*, on 5 September 1977, explicitly states that the SGPC had not acknowledged Bhajan as a Siri Singh Sāhib. Although recognizing the fruitful efforts of Bhajan, Tohra (then the President of the SGPC) declared that Bhajan had bestowed the title on himself. The report reads:

High Priest Guruchuran Singh Tohra, president of the management committee for northern India's Sikh temples, confirms that his council has given 'full approval' to 3HO and recognizes the yogi as a preacher. Tohra, however, says that this does not mean Bhajan is the Sikh leader of the Western Hemisphere, as he claims. The Sikhs do not create such offices. Nor, Tohra adds, has the

committee given Bhajan the rarely bestowed title, Siri Singh Sahib (the equivalent of saying 'Sir' three times), which he uses.⁵

It is after the alleged honour by the SGPC that Yogī Bhajan began preaching Sikh teachings openly to his American students. Thus the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood was officially registered in 1973. The title was later modified in non-gender language to become Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. Many of Bhajan's yoga students underwent the *amrit* ceremony and became the *gorā* Sikhs of the *Panth*.

The influence Yogī Bhajan continues to have, even after his death, on both his 3HO and Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere students, cannot be overestimated. *Power Broker* magazine has counted Bhajan among 'New Mexico's Top 100' influential business people. The article pertaining to Bhajan reads:

Leader of one of New Mexico's fastest growing and most dynamic business communities with 14 corporations under Khalsa International Business and Trading. Business interests range from computer software development and herbal teas to one of the nation's largest private security firms in the Espanola-based Akal Security. His birthday celebrations draw the likes of Gov. Gary Johnson and Senate President Pro Tem Manny Aragon. ... Gives substantial donations to peace organizations around the world.⁶

Collectively, the list of companies is referred to as 'KIIT', that is, Khalsa International Industries and Trades and is 'a group of companies that exist to serve, heal and uplift humanity through quality products and services'.⁷ The KIIT group includes such companies as the book-ordering service called 'Ancient Healing Ways Catalogue', which trades in all kinds of material with regard to the 3HO and Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. Other companies include 'Golden Temple Enterprises' from where literature may be obtained, 'Yogi Tea', which markets caffeine-free herbal tea, as well as 'Sunshine Products', which make available natural body and mind stimulants. Publicity advertisements for the above companies are toned with captivating phrases from Yogī Bhajan, such as: 'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience'.⁸ Thus the emphasis is towards spiritual well-being, an aspect on which the majority of Bhajan's teachings are based. This potential of realizing one's spiritual assets is further heightened through the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*. During his lifetime, Bhajan had not announced a successor: this matter, he believed, would be decided for itself in accordance with the Will of God.⁹ Presently, there is no one authoritative person who has taken on Bhajan's role. There are a number of Sikhs of the Western Hemisphere who take responsibility for its organization: one of these is Inderjit Kaur – Bhajan's wife.

The Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO)

Importantly, those who follow the 3HO way of life are not required to follow the Sikh teachings of the Sikh Dharma. Although the ideals of the 3HO, such as the holistic approach to everyday life and the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, are performed by the majority of the students of the Sikh Dharma also; students who follow the 3HO alone, are not required to live a Sikh way of life. Infact, 3HO literature stresses that:

You do not have to be a Sikh to practice or teach the 3HO lifestyle. There are thousands of people who are actively engaged in spreading the 3HO teachings who do not follow the Sikh religion. Nor do all Sikhs utilize the teachings of 3HO in their personal lives.¹⁰

The emphasis of the 3HO is on *kuṇḍalinī yoga* to awaken the mind spiritually, the practice of *kuṇḍalinī* has nothing in common with Sikh praxis. However, as mentioned previously, it is also practiced by the *gorā* Sikhs of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. It is in this respect that the differentiation between the two groups is often blurred. *Kuṇḍalinī yoga*, for the *gorās*, is taught through IKYTA, International Kundalini Yoga Teachers Association. This is an affiliation of qualified *kuṇḍalinī yoga* teachers. According to the 3HO *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is:

a potent and effective system of self-transformation and personal development. Kundalini Yoga stimulates individual growth through systematic techniques that strengthen the nervous system and balance the glandular system (the guardians of health), for increased stability and vitality. Meditation improves mental concentration, sharpens awareness and give (*sic*) the direct experience of consciousness. Kundalini Yoga encompasses and draws from all yogic systems and techniques.¹¹

Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere

The majority of *gorā* Sikhs have taken *amrit* and, therefore, adopt the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* fully. *Gorā* Sikhs tend to wear white clothes and white turbans. There is a strong tradition among *gorā* Sikh females, also, to wear a white turban. In this sense, therefore, the *gorā* Sikhs exhibit a keen sense of a Sikh identity in terms of *Khālsā* appearance.

Bhajan has often been called the ‘Father of the Woodstock Nation’. At a time when drugs and alcohol were becoming increasingly popular in America, he introduced a way of life that aimed at fulfilment without intoxicants. Initially beginning with the 3HO teachings, many students went further to find solidarity with the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere under the leadership of Yogī Bhajan.

According to the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, the principles of Sikhism are the following:

- Rising early, bathing and meditating on God's name to cleanse the mind.
- Continuing to remember God's name with every breath throughout the day.
- Working and earning by one's honest efforts.
- Living a family way of life practising truthfulness in all dealings.
- Sharing and selflessly serving others.
- Abstaining from drugs, alcohol, tobacco and meat.
- Keeping the body healthy and as created by God.¹²

Yogī Bhajan concentrated on the threefold Sikh principle of *nām japnā* (meditation on the Name of God), *kīrt karnā* (honest and good deeds), and *vand chaknā* (sharing with others). So, through the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere: 'The universal message of the Sikh path reaches out to people of all faiths and cultural backgrounds to encourage peace and unity for all mankind'.¹³

To assist the needs of the students of the growing Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere the Khalsa Council was formed in 1974 by Yogī Bhajan, whereby he appointed ministers to cater for the demands of the *gorā* Sikhs.¹⁴ The ministers, many of whom had already been serving these roles previously in 1972 before the formal establishment of the Khalsa Council, were given the titles of Singh Sāhib for male ministers, and Sardārni Sāhibā for female ministers. These honorific titles continue to the present day and involve on behalf of the ministers the 'responsibility for the welfare of the sangat in their respective areas'.¹⁵ Bhajan taught that the Singh Sāhibs and Sardārni Sāhibās are not to be seen as higher in any sense than other Sikhs, on the contrary 'he or she was considered a servant of the sangat'.¹⁶

Beliefs of the *gorā* Sikhs

The central beliefs of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere are found in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. However, there a number of prominent beliefs among *gorā* Sikhs which challenge their Sikh orientation.

Kuṇḍalinī yoga

It is the formidable insistence that Yogī Bhajan placed on *kuṇḍalinī yoga* for a sound body and mind, which creates the primary difference between the majority of the *Panth* and the followers of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. In his own words, Yogī Bhajan expressed the prominence of

kuṇḍalinī yoga for the *gorā* Sikhs, as well as the students of the 3HO. He wrote:

I would like to invoke in you that power that is already yours. It is called Kundalini. Mostly it is dormant, but it's [*sic*] very existence creates the radiance to keep you alive. Kundalini will give you what riches and money cannot; it will give you happiness and satisfaction in your life.¹⁷

In their teachings, the Sikh Gurūs emphasized that it is the yoga of the *Nām* alone, that is, *nām simran*, that is supreme to all other practices:

Contemplating over the Name and the Saint-Guru's hymns, O Yogi, thou shalt become a hero, through the four ages. (AG 908)¹⁸

For Gurū Nānak the true *yogī* was one who lived amidst the material pleasures and desires of the world, but without forming attachment to them (AG 730).

Essential to the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, as taught by Yogī Bhajan, is *prāṇāyāma*, that is, breathing techniques that aid the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī* lying dormant at the bottom of the spine. In this respect, the students of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere are outwardly contradicting *gurbāṇī* that openly states that the realization of God does not come through the breathing techniques of the *yogīs*:

When the Imperceptible Lord reveals His ownself (*sic*) to man, then is he blessed with the knowledge, which the Yogis think, they obtain through breath control in the central, left and right bronchi.

Nanak, the True Lord is above the three devices of breath-control. (AG 944)¹⁹

The *gorā* Sikhs recognize that the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is *not* readily accepted in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. They claim, however, that they are more health-orientated than the Punjabi *Panth*. A student of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere writes:

Sikh Dharma members practice three different types of yoga (1.*kundalini*, 2.*laya*, and 3.*tantric*) which are supposed to enable them to meditate more efficiently. Members also put great emphasis on health, more so than is respected in the orthodox Sikh religion. In fact both yoga and vegetarianism are rejected by the Holy Book as forms of blind ritual. There has been some controversy.²⁰

On the one hand, the *gorā* Sikhs claim to be more conformist than Punjabi *Khālsā* Sikhs, yet, on the other hand, admit that such practices as vegetarianism and practicing yoga have no place in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Interestingly, the majority of *gorā* Sikhs are vegetarians.

Justification for the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* has, nevertheless, been asserted by the students of Bhajan, who equate the result of raising the *kuṇḍalinī* to the Sikh idea of *chaṛhadī kalā*. Basically, *chaṛhadī kalā* refers to the raised spirits of the *Panth*. Yogī Bhajan's linking of the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* to Sikh teachings is best illustrated by the fact that he believed that the

very term *chaḥḥadī kalā* was used by Gurū Gobind Singh to allude to the rising of the *kuṇḍalinī*.²¹ His emphasis was that *chaḥḥadī kalā* causes the individual to abandon all obstacles on the path towards *mukti*. In accordance with this teaching he remarked:

When you do Kundalini Yoga, it is a simple, direct experience, and the kundalini rises. It affects you in spite of all your garbage, so that you start looking toward infinity. That is Cherdi Kala. 'I am I am. Nothing can budge me. Nothing. I am not going to give in. I am all right.'²²

Validation of the *gorā* Sikh belief that *chaḥḥadī kalā* is the result of the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī*, appears to hold ground in the words of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. A verse from the *Ādi Granth* states:

ਕੁੰਡਲੀ ਸੁਰਜੀ ਸਤ ਸੰਗਤਿ ਪਰਮਾੰਦ ਗੁਰੂ ਮੁਖਿ ਮਚਾ (੧੪੦੨)

Kuṇḍalinī sūrjī sat saṅgat parmānaṇḍ gurū mukh machā (1402)

In his translation, Manmohan Singh has translated *kuṇḍalinī* as 'mind's tongue', his translation of the above verse is as follows:

Associating with the saints, their mind's tongue is opened and through the supreme Guru, they enjoy the Lord of supreme bliss. (AG 1402)²³

According to Manmohan Singh, the *kuṇḍalinī* is awakened through the company of the holy congregation. There is no mention of an actual yogic technique whereby to awaken the latent energy. But, AG 1402 supports Bhajan's identification of the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī* with the raised spirits, *chaḥḥadī kalā*, attained through the *satsaṅgat*.

A Sikh character is given to the yoga as taught by Bhajan. Many classes begin the yoga session by first chanting the *mantar* of

Ek Ong Kār Sat Nām Siri Wāhe Gurū

Clearly, this chanting is very Sikh in nature, calling on one of the most frequently used names for the Absolute, which is *Wāhegurū*, meaning the 'Wonderful One'. For *gorā* Sikhs, this *mantar* is believed to open the *cakras*, or the energy centres.²⁴

Bhajan went further in his identification of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* with Sikhism. He explained that for Sikhs, *kuṇḍalinī yoga* is *Satnām*. This idea is based on the teaching of Bhajan that yoga is to be united with the soul-giver,²⁵ God, who in Sikhism is often referred to as *Satnām*. Students of Bhajan refer to the chanting of *Satnām* as the *bīj mantar*, the 'seed *mantar*', which enables the aspirant to tune in with the highest consciousness, to the Absolute, and realize his or her true essence: this is when total harmony is experienced.²⁶

Another *mantar* that is chanted to begin a *kuṇḍalinī yoga* class is

Ong Nāmo Gurū Dev Nāmo

I Bow to the Creator, to the Divine Teacher Within²⁷

Kuṇḍalinī participants from all faiths recite the above *mantar*: it is not necessarily Sikh orientated. This *mantar* calls on the great *kuṇḍalinī yoga* masters, enabling the student to 'tune in' to the consciousness of those great masters who have awakened the *kuṇḍalinī*, and who, therefore, have achieved spiritual liberation.²⁸ This *mantar* links the individual and the spiritual masters and was referred to by Bhajan as the 'Golden Chain' indicating the 'transference of spiritual awareness, consciousness, and power ... from master to disciple'.²⁹ The *mantar* of *Ong Nāmo Gurū Dev Nāmo* is sometimes referred to as the *Ādi Mantar*, that is, the first *mantar* or the primary *mantar*, in the sense that it provides the essential link with the spiritual masters.³⁰

In their teachings, the Sikh Gurūs constantly highlighted that yogic practices of the ascetics had no place in a householder's life. And yet, importantly, the yoga practised by the Sikh Dharma, nevertheless, enables one to live as a *grihast*, a householder. The students of the Sikh Dharma are not ascetics. *Gurbāṇī* is seen by the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere as the *śabad* that procures the melody in one's heart, just as much as in Sikh teaching generally. In this respect *gurbāṇī* is reflected on by the *gorā* Sikhs to eradicate the ego, as is stressed in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*:

Through Gurbani, that unbeaten melody is procured and therewith egotism is annulled. (AG 21)³¹

In fact, in the hymns of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the Gurūs speak of the unstruck melody (*anahad śabad*) associated with the height of meditation. The verse below seems to convey the point that, through the correct guidance of the teacher, the student can reach this level of spirituality:

Under Guru's instruction, the perfect man meditates on the Lord. In his mind, the unstruck melodious bands play. (AG 228)³²

This might suggest that *gurbāṇī* and yogic meditation are not so disparate. McLeod, however, has commented that, although the analogy of the *anahad śabad* is used in the terminology of Gurū Nānak's hymns, it reflects a mere influence of Nāth terminology on the words of Gurū Nānak. McLeod clarifies Gurū Nānak's treatment of such words as 'a useful figure of speech, a convenient means of conveying some impression of an experience which is strictly inexpressible'.³³ If this is the case, then the practice of, and belief in, the benefits of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* remain counter to the Sikh identity of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere.

White tantra

In addition to the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, Bhajan taught what is known as 'White *tantra*'. The aim of White *tantric* yoga 'is to purify and uplift the being'.³⁴ It is in sharp contrast to the other two types of *tantra* namely, Black

tantra and Red *tantra*: neither of these were taught by Bhajan. Black *tantra* is often depicted as ‘black magic’. Red *tantra* is associated with sexual energy. The practice of any *tantric* rituals is alien to Sikhism generally; nevertheless, Yogī Bhajan was popularly referred to by his students as the *Mahān Tantric*, ‘The Master of White Tantric Yoga’.³⁵

White *tantra* is not *kuṇḍalinī yoga*: rather, it is practised in pairs at specific times that are known to the *Mahān Tantric* only. White *tantric* yoga is undertaken in the following manner:

All the participants sit in rows, facing each other. The tantric energy travels in a zig-zag pattern up and down the rows ... Although it is practised with a partner, White Tantric Yoga is not a “sexual” yoga. On the contrary, it transmutes the sex energy from the lower chakras (energy centers) to the higher chakras.³⁶

Purification of the mind through *tantric* yoga is not something that is practised by Sikhs generally, and certainly not by *Khālsā* Sikhs. Neither does White *tantra* have any justification in Sikh teachings. Belief that White *tantra* purifies the being is a criterion that clearly places the followers of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere outside the *Khālsā* definition of a Sikh.

The Ten Bodies

Yogī Bhajan taught that each individual has more than just a physical body. As with Indian metaphysics generally, Bhajan emphasized the impermanence of the physical body. This exterior body is changing constantly throughout one’s lifetime, being abandoned at each physical death, whereby a new physical body is entered into by the eternal soul. This is in line with Sikh teachings. According to the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, underneath this physical body there are ten additional bodies:

- 1 *Soul Body* – this is the eternal body, described as ‘God’s light which lives in your heart’ and is similar to Sikh teachings regarding the eternal soul, that has often been linked to the essence of God presiding within each human heart.
- 2 *Three Mental Bodies* – these are the three main aspects of the mind:
 - 1 Negative Mind: sends out warnings against danger.
 - 2 Positive Mind: inspiration.
 - 3 Neutral Mind: intuitive knowledge based on the above two minds.
- 3 *Physical Body* – a temple for God to live in.
- 4 *Pranic Body* – controls breath and ‘takes in Prana, the life force energy of the universe’. This body is strengthened through *prāṇāyāma*, breathing techniques.
- 5 *Arc Body* – spiritual energy, sometimes called the ‘halo’.
- 6 *Auric Body* – the aura, the electromagnetic energy of each individual.
- 7 *Subtle Body* – enables one to understand surrounding situations.
- 8 *Radiant Body* – the courage and charisma of the individual.³⁷

Although all ten bodies are interlinked, at death it is only the soul and the subtle body that go on to the next realm of existence, whether it be rebirth or *mukti*. Death is described as *turiyā*, a good sleep, where the individual has no consciousness of separateness from the higher consciousness in liberation.³⁸ Here, it appears as though Parwha Kaur Khalsa, a *gorā* Sikh, is describing death more in a monistic context. If this is the case, then this belief of the *gorā* Sikhs is not Sikh since Sikhism teaches the supremacy of God over the individual soul at all times even at *mukti*. However, the Sikh orientation is clearly marked when Khalsa expresses the belief that death is seen as union with the Creator, and ‘Sikhs regard this time as an opportunity to love and accept God’s will and sing His Praises’.³⁹

The Gurū

In line with Sikhism generally, the *gorā* Sikhs believe that, after the ten human Sikh Gurūs, the eternal Gurū of the Sikhs is the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Although the position of Yogī Bhajan is exalted to a high plane at times, the *gorā* Sikhs do not regard him as a Gurū in the same manner as the ten Sikh Gurūs. They are adamant about the fact that they are students of the *Panth*, and not students of Harbhajan Singh Puri. Obviously Bhajan was a gurū in the sense that he was the teacher, the master of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, but he is not regarded as an extension to the ten human Gurūs in any way. Neither is Yogī Bhajan referred to as a *Sant*, although he is respected and honoured with the title of Siri Singh Sāhib. Thus, in this respect the *gorā* Sikhs are thoroughly *Khālsā* orientated, more so than the Nāmdhāris who adhere to the tradition of living Gurūs, but do not accept the *Ādī Granth* as the Gurū of the Sikhs.

The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is accepted by Sikhs as a *universal* teaching. Significantly, the practical outcome of this has been thoroughly realized through the efforts of Bhajan. Had it not been for him, Sikhism would continue to have been confined to a Punjabi background, as is the case for the majority of the *Panth*.

Affinity Towards Gurū Rāmdās

There is another aspect in which the firm links with Sikh Gurūs are evident among the *gorā* Sikhs. The teachings of the fourth Sikh Gurū were particularly emphasized by Yogī Bhajan. This is due to the fact that, whilst undertaking two days of *sewā* at Amritsar, Yogī Bhajan professed to have had a strong affinity with the fourth Gurū. It is for this reason that many Sikh Dharma *ashrams*, opened under the influence of Bhajan, are referred to as *Gurū Rām Dās Ashram*. Furthermore, Yogī Bhajan often used the *mantar*:

*Gurū Gurū Wāhegurū,
Gurū Rām Dās Gurū.*⁴⁰

This close affinity for the fourth Gurū has resulted in the *gorā* Sikhs undertaking continuous journeys to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the city founded by Gurū Rāmdās. Groups of *gorā* Sikhs perform *kīrtan* at *Harmandir Sāhib* and keenly take part in *sewā* at the Golden Temple complex. These are valid reasons to promote *Khālsā* Sikh identity among the *gorā* Sikhs.

Therefore, although their core metaphysics are essentially those contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, it is the observable emphasis on the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and white *tantra* that deviates from Sikh teachings.

Practices of the *gorā* Sikhs

It is interesting to note that the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere has no unique *rahit* of its own. It is the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, issued by the SGPC that is conformed to. Therefore, there is no initiation into the Sikh Dharma of Yogī Bhajan as such. Rather, students initiate into the *Khālsā Panth*.

According to Dusenbery, a parallel is present between the efforts of the Singh Sabhā and the aim of Yogī Bhajan.⁴¹ The Singh Sabhā, during the latter period of the nineteenth century, asserted what the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere is emphasizing today, that is, an overt expression of Sikh identity in periods considered to be of threat to the future survival of Sikh values. Dusenbery's assumption is further strengthened by the fact that Yogī Bhajan emphasized that the *Khālsā* has a very important standing with regard to Sikh identity. Thus displaying the Five Ks is essential for those guided by Yogī Bhajan, enabling the *gorā* Sikhs to assert their *Khālsā* Sikh identity.

Amrit chaknā

There is a great emphasis among students of the Sikh Dharma on taking *amrit* and, accordingly, wearing the five symbols of the *Khālsā*, along with the *bāṇā*, the traditional white clothing of a long tunic, often accompanied with tight pyjama-like trousers. Observance of the Five Ks and the traditional *bāṇā* is noticeably more so than with Punjabi Sikhs. Their importance was stressed by Yogī Bhajan in his following words:

One thing in Sikh Dharma is very unique which you do not understand. It has a tremendous subconscious effect on you. That is the bana which gives you *Niara Panth*, distinct path, which totally pulls you up. There is no way that you can wear this and not be conscious.⁴²

With regard to the turban, a *gorā* Sikh pointed out that it is not just a religious practice, but also protects the head and brain from damage. This aspect is also

voiced in an article from the Sikh Dharma homepage in the words originally spoken by Yogī Bhajan:

Tying a turban and having hair on your head does not make you a Sikh. A turban crowns you with your own capacity to understand. You are deathless in the face of a direct confrontation with death. Wearing a head covering enables you to command your sixth center, the Agia Chakra. Covering the head stabilizes the cerebral matter and the 26 parts of the brain . . . The benefit of wearing a turban is that when you wrap the 5 to 7 layers of cloth, you cover the temples, which prevents any variance or movement in the different parts of the skull. A turban automatically gives you a cranial self-adjustment. You can pay for a cranial adjustment, or you can tie a turban for free!⁴³

Thus, according to Bhajan, wearing a turban is of benefit to both Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. Particularly apparent from the above is the fact that the turban is a helpful tool for those who are students of the 3HO whilst practising to awaken and raise the *kuṇḍalinī* through each *cakra*. Noticeably, among the students of the Sikh Dharma the turban is worn by both males and females. Among the students of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, the wearing of turbans by women is in sharp contrast to the Punjabi *Panth*, where turbaned women are by far in the minority.

On the whole, in the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere the turban tends to be white. The overall tendency to wear white clothing symbolizes the death of the ego. The emphasis on this kind of outward *Khālsā* Sikh identity is certainly apparent among those who follow the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. The majority of these students are *kesdhārī*. But if the overt Sikh identity of the *gorā* Sikhs is immediately apparent there are some ways in which their membership of the *Panth* is characterized by divisive attitudes.

In asserting their *Khālsā* stringency, the *gorā* Sikhs often show insensitivity to the feelings of Punjabi Sikhs, especially when remarks such as the following are made by the *gorā* Sikhs: ‘the orthodox Sikhs are all baptized and their adherence to the five “ks” in the present time isn’t as dramatic as that of members of Sikh Dharma’.⁴⁴ The *gorā* Sikhs openly declare that they are more rigid in practising the *Khālsā* than the Punjabi Sikhs themselves. What the *gorā* Sikhs do not appear to bear in mind is that they are students of a phenomenon introduced to them in the mere late 1960s, whereas the Punjabi Sikhs are the 500-year-old followers of this now global religion.

The *gorā* Sikhs are adamant concerning the belief that their *Khālsā* identity fulfils Gurū Gobind’s prophecy of the *Khālsā* spreading to all four corners of the world. The *gorā* Sikhs’ strict observance of the Five Ks, and their desire to retain the symbols of their *Khālsā* identity, is best illustrated via their views towards the American Army dress regulations. News was received by Bhajan in 1973 informing him that two *gorā* Sikh officers were forced to cut their hair and shave their beards.⁴⁵ Naturally, the *gorā* Sikh community was agitated by the

actions of the army and campaigns were begun on behalf of the two soldiers. A few months later, on 7 January 1974, the regulations were revised to include the following addition: 'A Sikh who is declared to be in good standing by his local Minister may be allowed to deviate from the Army dress code, by wearing beard, hair, turban, special underwear, comb, and a symbolic replica of a kirpan'.⁴⁶ Thus the efforts and continuous persistence of the *gorā* Sikh community paid dividends in the end by allowing Sikhs to retain their turbans and beards whilst serving in the US army. This is very much a strong definition of the *gorā* Sikhs' determination to uphold the *Khālsā* identity. However, the decision to allow Sikh officers to retain hair and beard was reversed again in 1981. The issue remains under appeal.⁴⁷

Annual Events

As with Sikh practice in general, the *gorā* Sikhs also celebrate the *gurpurbs* and Sikh festivals of *baisākhī*, *dīwālī* and *holā mohallā*. The birthday of Yogī Bhajan, as the administrator of Sikh teachings to the West, is also celebrated by the *gorā* Sikhs. Additionally, annual events include worldwide camps. Camps are becoming a feature of Sikh practice in—general as part of its aim of promoting Sikh identity amongst the youth. The practices of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and meditation are given particular prominence during the day's activities.

Simplicity

The essence of a simple life forms the nucleus of Yogī Bhajan's teachings. A drug-free existence is seen as essential and this, as is the practice among Nāmdhāris, includes abstinence from alcohol, tea and coffee. Rehabilitation centres are operated by students to allow aspirants to live up to the drug-free lifestyle. The 'Ram Das Puri Healing Center' situated near Espanola in New Mexico, is becoming renowned for its efforts towards rejuvenation, prayer and healing through *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and herbal remedies.

Students of the Sikh Dharma are, as noted above, vegetarians. Vegetarianism, I reiterate, is not a requirement of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*; however, many Sikhs abstain from consuming meat or eggs. Many students of the Sikh Dharma have been successful in opening a chain of restaurants known as 'Golden Temple Consciousness Cookeries' in the United States and Europe. These restaurants, of course, serve vegetarian dishes only.

The giving of a tenth of one's earnings, *dasvandh*, to help those less fortunate, is an ideal of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, and is also an important feature of general Sikh practice. The principle of *dasvandh* is based on one of the three pillars of Sikhism, that is, *vand chaknā*. A true Sikh is one who practises all three pillars with a sincere heart. The values of giving *dasvandh* have been expressed through Yogī Bhajan. He wrote:

Learn from me. I came in this country, and I earned money. Whatever anybody has given was deposited, as the Guru's; that is Dharma. Whatever Dasvandh was given was deposited. For my own living, I earned every penny of it. ... Everything that I earned I put to work for you, because I want to establish a relationship with you. I came here to serve you – not to rule you, govern you, guide you, preach to you, teach you, convert you, destroy you or build you. No! I have no such purpose. I have come to the United States to pay my dues.⁴⁸

Ashrams

The centres established by Yogī Bhajan are usually referred to as *ashrams*. Services in the *ashrams* of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere have a Sikh orientation with the Sikh *ardās* also being recited. Usually, the service is conducted in the language of the country, quite often in English. For this purpose, a translation of selected verses and prayers, the Sikh *ardās*, as well as the *Sidh Ghost* (Gurū Nānak's address to the Yogīs) are utilized.⁴⁹ These are the main translations used by those *gorā* Sikhs who cannot read or understand Punjabi. With regard to the translation of the whole of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, it is Manmohan Singh's translation of the scripture that is chiefly used in both the homes and the *ashrams* of *gorā* Sikhs.

The *ashrams* also display a *nisān sāhib*, but *not* a characteristically saffron Sikh one with the *Khaṇḍā* symbol. Rather, the *nisān sāhib* is triangular, white and gold. It was designed in 1972, and specifically so in order to distinguish the building as a centre of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. This suggests a certain separatism from the *Panth* in the same way that religious places are not called *gurdwārās* but *ashrams*. Thus, although the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere accentuates non-difference from the general *Panth*, it desires a certain degree of separation. The flag illustrates two triangles: the upper white triangle symbolizing *śanti*, that is, 'purity, light, peace, tranquility, harmony and saintliness', the bottom yellow triangle representing the *śakti* principle of 'power, courage, sacrifice, and action'.⁵⁰ In the centre of the flag is the blue *Ādi Śakti* symbol representing the 'logos of primal energy'.⁵¹ In line with Sikhism generally, the *nisān sāhib* of those Sikh Dharma centres that have one, is changed on *baisākhī*. However, a few of the centres have a tradition of *nisān sāhib sewā* on Gurū Nānak's birthday, in addition to *baisākhī*: therefore holding this occasion bi-annually. Not displaying the characteristic Sikh *nisān sāhib* clearly labels the *gorā* Sikh places of worship as different from other *gurdwārās*, thus inhibiting conformity in, and a uniformity of, the *Panth*.

Marriage

Obviously, marriages among the *gorā* Sikhs are not performed endogamously since there is no *zāt* structure amongst the non-Punjabi or, more specifically,

the non-Asian converts to Sikhism. In this respect the marriage arrangements of *gorā* Sikhs differ considerably from the majority of the Punjabi *Panth*, with the exception, however, of the Nāmdhāris, where inter-*zāt* marriages are frequent. The marriage ceremony among the *gorā* Sikhs is that of taking four *lāvān* around the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

The Younger Generation

The needs of the younger *gorā* Sikh generation have not been overlooked. The Sikh Dharma Office of Youth Affairs was established in 1991 by Yogī Bhajan. This association specifically seeks to involve young Sikhs actively in the activities of the *Panth* through a series of schools, youth programmes and camps. A particularly prominent activity includes the young *gorā* Sikhs attending schools in India for a period of time, enabling them to become bi-cultural and appreciate the traditions of *their* Sikh faith. Furthermore, the Khalsa Youth Camp has been operating for the last twenty years to see to the spiritual uplifting of the younger generation of *gorā* Sikhs. Children are encouraged to recite *bāṇīs* and learn about the history, development and teachings of the Sikh faith. Hence, it is through such associations that the promotion of Sikh identity among the younger generation of *gorā* Sikhs is encouraged.

The marked prominence placed on the wearing of the Five Ks and, in particular, the importance of being *kesdhārī*, clearly portrays the *gorā* Sikhs as following the *Khālsā* tradition. There are additional practices amongst them, however, that preclude a Sikh affiliation. Thus, although the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere believes that it is stringent in its *Khālsā* identity, it has its own areas of deviant praxis that inhibit Sikh identity.

The Identity of the *gorā* Sikhs

The very fact that the *gorā* Sikhs follow the teachings of the Sikh Gurūs and, moreover, adhere stringently to the requirements of a *Khālsā* Sikh as stated in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, are explicit indicators of their Sikh identity. The majority of *gorā* Sikhs are at least *kesdhārī*, if not *amritdhārī*. Therefore, the *gorā* Sikhs themselves assert their identity as Sikhs of the *Khālsā Panth*. They declare that they are Sikhs no less than the Punjabi Sikhs. In sharp contrast, Punjabi Sikhs do not freely label the *gorā* Sikhs as fellow Sikhs and a separation between the two groups exists at all times. From its inception to the present day, the Sikh faith has always had the Punjab as its inspiration, and this degree of Punjabi ethnicity is absent among the *gorā* Sikhs.

Thus, the most obvious division in the *Panth* between the *gorā* Sikhs and the Punjabi Sikhs lies on the basis of ethnicity. Sikh culture and tradition is

inevitably bound with the Punjabi tradition and Punjabi culture of India. An important theme of this ethnic Punjabi culture is that of *izzat* 'honour'. Norms of society are embedded in the notion of *izzat*; it is in accordance with *izzat* that the Punjabi will approach society. This *izzat* concept is absent from the moral sensitivities of the *gorā* Sikhs. Furthermore, it is behaviour in accordance with *izzat* that has led to misunderstanding between the Punjabi Sikhs and the *gorā* Sikhs:

the moral sensitivities of Gora Sikhs and Punjabi Sikhs (and, in this regard, particularly those of the dominant Jat Sikhs) not only differ but also differ in culturally specific ways. . . . the notion of *izzat* (honor), apparently so central to Jat Sikh "moral affect," is not shared by Gora Sikhs. . . . this difference in moral affect, I argue, enters into the active estrangement of Gora Sikhs and Jat Sikhs and their (mis)apprehension of one another.⁵²

So, for example, whereas for the majority of Punjabi Sikhs a marriage outside of the *zāt* would bring great shame on the *izzat* of the family, this issue is not present in the lives of the *gorā* Sikhs. Thus, as long as endogamy persists in the Punjabi *Panth*, marriages between *gorā* Sikhs and Punjabi Sikhs will not take place. In this sense, a separation is bound to continue between the two divisions of the *Panth*. Nevertheless, although inter-caste marriages do not take place within the Punjabi *Panth* itself, Punjabi Sikhs of different *zāts* mix freely. This is on the basis that each Punjabi will act in accordance with what retains or increases the *izzat* of the particular family, and will be aware of the moral sensitivities of others. Importantly, however, there is no written *rahit* that states a Sikh must be a Punjabi. The ethnicity issue is expanded on in the final chapter.

Yogī Bhajan's encouragement for *gorā* Sikhs to assert their Sikh identity proudly is excessive. He continually advised the *gorā* Sikhs not to concede to discrimination by Punjabi Sikhs. This has often resulted in the *gorā* Sikhs asserting that they are more Sikh than the Punjabi *Panth* as a whole. On the issue of the Sikh identity of the *gorā* Sikhs, Yogī Bhajan expressed that:

you are not Sikhs because a yogi came from India and gave you the message. You are not Sikhs because you want to be Sikhs. You are not Sikhs because it is a matter of convenience. You are Sikhs because you are destined to be Sikhs and you'll remain Sikhs so long as you are destined.⁵³

His identification with all aspects of Sikhism, or at least his desire to be identified as so, is best illustrated in his appeal for the *laṅgar* to be served whilst sitting on the floor, rather than at tables with chairs. This appeared in the widely circulated Sikh newspaper *Des Pardes*. It was an issue quite prominent in June 1998 since the *Jathedār*, the chairman of the *Akal Takht* expressed the need for *paṅgat* to be followed in all *gurdwārās* worldwide. This is the practice of sitting in rows on the floor whilst eating *laṅgar*, a requirement made by the Gurūs to symbolize equality. By showing his concern in the matter, Yogī Bhajan

clearly indicated that he was involved, together with the *gorā* Sikhs, in all decisions that affect the *Panth*, Punjabi and non-Punjabi, as a whole.

Yet it must be said that a significant inhibitor of the Sikh ethos of the *gorā* Sikhs is the emphasis they place on the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*. This is one element, significant enough, that contradicts *gurbāṇī*. However, it is the *gorā* Sikhs' overt emphasis on the *bāṇā* that enables them to fit quite neatly into the *Khālsā* identity. The *gorā* Sikhs' sense of a Sikh identity is further strengthened by the fact that all major Sikh events are celebrated every year. Moreover, unlike the Ravidāsīs and Vālmikīs, *baisākhī* and *ḍīwālī* have an overt Sikh orientation among the *gorā* Sikhs. An account in the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere's journal, *Beads of Truth*, recalls the joyous celebration of *Gurgaddī* Day by the *gorā* Sikhs of America.⁵⁴ On this day, a parade of *gorā* Sikhs takes place in Yuba City to revere the day on which the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* was installed as the eternal Gurū of the Sikhs. In this respect, the *gorā* Sikhs are more akin to the general *Panth* than the Nāmdhāris, who refuse to recognize the *Ādi Granth* as Gurū. Of significance here is that the *gorā* Sikhs, in line with the general *Panth*, acknowledge the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* as *their* Gurū; no other equates to the line of gurūship. Another significant point with regard to their *Khālsā* identity is that the *gorā* Sikhs fully comply with the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*.

Yogī Bhajan did not sanction a distinct or unique *rahit* for the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. Thus although having founded the 3HO Yogī Bhajan was the *administrator* of Sikhism in the Western Hemisphere. As such, then, the *gorā* Sikhs claim that theirs is not a following of or an affiliation to the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere *per se*. Rather, what students follow is Sikhism as taught by the Sikh Gurūs. The only real, major point of departure from the Punjabi *Panth* is the practice of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, especially by those who practice the principles of the 3HO. I must stress, nevertheless, that although the *gorā* Sikhs accentuate their position *within* the *Panth*, a degree of distinction *from* the *Panth* is inescapable when bearing in mind that centres of the group are specifically centres of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. The absence of the term *gurdwārā*, and the absence of a saffron *niśān sāhib* displaying a *Khaṇḍā*, clarify the visible differentiation. Furthermore, in practice, Yogī Bhajan was elevated to a pronounced level of leadership in the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. One cannot overlook the fact that *he* was the leader or the administrator of Sikhism in the West, and his character informs the general ethos of the group. Something of his status among the *gorās* is echoed in the following words from the literature of the 'Sikh Dharma International' group:

It is since the late 1960s that thousands of people have begun to embrace the Sikh way of life on a global level. The Siri Singh Sahib Yogi Bhajan greatly contributed to this awakening to Sikh values through his inspired guidance and leadership.

... Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere has become a powerful vehicle for spreading the light of the Guru's teachings, because its technologies are uniquely suited to helping people reclaim their spirituality, dignity, and grace. Sikh Dharma is a religion of experience that is open and available to all, Sikh and non-Sikh alike. It teaches that the virtues of love, courage, dedication, and righteousness belong to all people, just as all people have a birthright to be Healthy, Happy and Holy.⁵⁵

One is tempted to question, therefore, whether it is *gurbāṇī* that the *gorā* Sikhs turn to, or whether it is *gurbāṇī* as expressed through Yogī Bhajan that is the focus.

Moreover, the *gorā* Sikhs' degree of adherence to the principles of Sikhism cannot be compared with the Punjabi *Panth* as a whole. This, as highlighted earlier, is due to the fact that the *gorā* Sikh following is still in its first generation of development. The preponderance of *gorā* Sikhs is by choice and not by Sikh birth. This makes a great deal of difference when assessing the level of religious conformity of a group. Therefore, the present enthusiasm of the converts is yet to be tested with the future generations of *gorā* Sikhs. It must also be remembered that, whereas the migrant Punjabi Sikhs have had to accommodate themselves to a different environment in which alien cultures have, and will, affect the younger generation, the *gorā* Sikhs have not had to face these influences as outsiders in a host nation. The western culture is *their* culture, but they choose to adopt the Sikh way of life. On the other hand, for the Punjabi Sikhs, their culture is Punjabi but they have been influenced, and sometimes forced, in differing degrees, to adapt according to the culture of the country to which they have migrated.

The *gorā* Sikh elevation of the *Khālsā* identity is aptly highlighted in their criticism of the apparently lax behaviour of the Punjabi Sikhs. This is nowhere more adamantly asserted than in the 1973 *Rejoinder* article by a *gorā* Sikh, Premka Kaur, then the Administrative Director of Sikh Dharma Brotherhood. The rejoinder by Premka Kaur was written in response to an article by a Punjabi Sikh, Amarjit Singh Sethi, which had appeared in the earlier November 1972 issue of the *Sikh Review*. The article was also printed by the *Sikh Courier*.⁵⁶ Kaur's introductory paragraph, cited from the *Sikh Review*, reads:

The Amarjit Singh Sethi's article, ... has raised in the hearts and souls of the Sikhs in America and throughout the world an outraged cry against the treachery of those to justify their faithlessness, (*sic*) their falsehood who have tried and their slander, (*sic*) by sitting in judgement upon the very words and instructions of the Guru.⁵⁷

The purport of Kaur's article is to voice the concern that it is not only Punjabis who are entitled to become Sikhs. This is because, as she points out, *gurbāṇī* is not confined to Punjabis or to Indians alone. It is through Premka Kaur's

correspondence to the *Sikh Review* that Punjabi Sikhs first came to know of the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood following the distribution of thousands of copies of Kaur's letter to the Punjabi *Panth* by the SGPC.⁵⁸

Further volatile emotions between Punjabi and *gorā* Sikhs have ignited due to the fact that Premka Kaur claimed that, on the whole, the Punjabi Sikhs are not following the teachings of *gurbānī*, and that the Punjabi Sikhs are endeavouring to adjust the definition of a Sikh, as contained in the *Rehat Maryādā*, to fit into their lapsed retention of the *Khālsā* rules. She states that Punjabi Sikhs are becoming more concerned with societal trends than keeping the *Khālsā* form. I quote at length from Kaur's letter:

There is no *gursikh* unless he is a student of the Guru *first*. One is never a *gursikh* because he happened to be born in India. There is no student of the Guru who has the right to reverse or disregard the *hukam* of his Guru and still call himself a *gursikh*. You are truly losing sight of your very foundation stone, your very roots. You are sitting on the end of a branch and you are cutting it off of the tree. You have become more concerned with society, more concerned with your image as a social group, and you have totally forgotten that if you are not Sikhs of the Guru, then Sikh means nothing at all. You can be a Punjabi no matter what you do and no matter where you go, but you cannot call yourself a Sikh unless you are living as a Sikh. ... Those Sikhs, (or rather those born into Sikh families) who have cared more for profit and more for Western convention and fashion, who have cared more for social acceptance and a life of ease – they are not Sikhs.⁵⁹

It follows that, according to Premka Kaur, who claims to speak for the American *gorā* Sikhs as a whole, the *gorā* converts are apparently the more rigid followers of the *Panth* than the *sahajdhārī* Punjabi Sikhs. But the comparison between the *gorā* Sikhs and the *sahajdhārīs* that Premka Kaur has made is unfair. Punjabi *sahajdhārīs* cannot be judged in accordance with their outward form, for the simple reason that they are not *Khālsā* Sikhs. In this respect, it could be claimed that it is those *gorā* Sikhs who practice *kuṇḍalinī yoga* who are ignoring the teachings of the Gurūs, who spoke out against yogic practices. And, evidently, these practices form an important part of *gorā* Sikh life, sufficiently so to challenge their conformity to Sikh identity in terms of basic beliefs.

The *gorā* Sikhs undoubtedly shed a different light on the issue of Sikh identity to that most commonly associated with the *Panth* and, indeed, in view of the groups that have been discussed in earlier chapters. However, the *gorā* Sikhs are not taking a back seat, they declare assertively that they are Sikhs of the *Panth*, no less than the Punjabis. If this means separate places of worship, then so be it. Importantly, this is no different to many groups within the *Panth* whom, as I have illustrated, have their own particular places of worship.

Since the definition of a Sikh according to the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* makes no mention of ethnicity, the *gorā* Sikhs are to be counted among the followers of the *Khālsā Panth*. As far as speaking, writing and understanding the Punjabi

language is concerned, this is something that many British-born Punjabi Sikhs themselves find difficult, and for many of these Punjabi Sikhs the mode of communication is English. With regard to the interpretation of *gurmukhī*, Sikhs living in India also have difficulties. Therefore, if these same individuals are unhesitant about their Sikh affiliation, then, so are the *gorā* Sikhs.

The western, non-Punjabi *Panth*, therefore, brings into question the whole issue of ethnicity as a criterion with which to assess the Sikh identity of a group. Ultimately, the non-Punjabi *Panth* is bringing to the fore the concept that Sikhism is a universal faith. Whether the dominant Punjabi *Panth* will openly accept *gorā* Sikhs is something that only time will reveal.

Notes

¹ Dusenbery, V.A. 'Punjabi Sikhs and Gora Sikhs: Conflicting Assertions of Sikh Identity in North America' in O'Connell, et al., (1988) *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 344.

² Dusenbery, V.A. 'On the Moral Sensitivities of Sikhs in North America' in Lynch, O.M. (ed.) (1990) *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 247.

³ *Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, Los Angeles: Sikh Dharma/3HO Foundation, 1649 S. Robertson Blvd. PO Box 351149.

⁴ Khalsa, S.S. Shanti Kaur (1995) *The History of Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, Espanola: New Mexico: Sikh Dharma Publications, p. 15. The initials of S.S. indicate that Shanti Kaur Khalsa is a Sardārnī Sāhibā, an honorific title for female *gorā* Sikhs.

⁵ Uberoi 'Yogi Bhajan's Synthetic Sikhism' in *Time*, 5 September 1977, p. 24.

⁶ *Power Broker*, November 16–22, p. 14 (n.d.).

⁷ *KIIT Mission Statement*, Los Angeles: 3HO Foundation, PO Box 351149.

⁸ Cited on the Sunshine Products newsletter.

⁹ Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, p. 166.

¹⁰ *3HO Foundation*, Los Angeles: 3HO Foundation, PO Box 351149.

¹¹ 'Kundalini Yoga' – www.yogibhajan.com

¹² 'Sikh Dharma' by the 3HO Foundation.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 'Message from Siri Singh Sahib Yogi Bhajan' – www.sikhnet.com

¹⁸ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 2963.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3093.

²⁰ 'Sikh Dharma: Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO)' – www.cti.itc.virginia.edu

²¹ Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, p. 117.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 4634.

²⁴ Khalsa, P.K. *Kundalini Yoga*, p. 215.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 24–25.

- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 16.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 14.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 153.
- ³⁰ Khalsa, S.S. Rama Kirn Singh (ed.) (1980 edn of 1976) *Kundalini Yoga Manual*, California: Kundalini Research Institute Publications, p. 2.
- ³¹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, translator Manmohan Singh, p. 69.
- ³² Ibid., p. 755.
- ³³ McLeod, W.H. (1996 edn of 1968) *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 192.
- ³⁴ Khalsa, P.K. *Kundalini Yoga*, p. 179.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 180.
- ³⁷ Ibid., pp. 184–86.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 189.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 76.
- ⁴¹ Dusenbery, V.A. 'Of Singh Sabhas, Siri Singh Sahibs, and Sikh Scholars' in Barrier, N.G. and Dusenbery, V.A. (1989) *The Sikh Diaspora*, Delhi: Chanakya Publications, p. 91.
- ⁴² Yogi Bhajan cited in Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, pp. 138–39.
- ⁴³ 'The Turban Spiritually' – www.sikhnet.com
- ⁴⁴ 'Sikh Dharma' – www.cti.itc.virginia.edu
- ⁴⁵ Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, p.44–45.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 45.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ 'Learn From Me, Give To Dasvandh' – www.sikhnet.com
- ⁴⁹ Khalsa, S.K. *The History of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere*, p. 36.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Dusenbery, 'On the Moral Sensitivities of Sikhs in North America' p. 241.
- ⁵³ Bhajan, Yogi, 'An Attitude of Deathlessness' in *Beads of Truth*, 2 (1989): 36.
- ⁵⁴ Khalsa, P.K. 'Yuba City – New Punjab!' in *ibid*, pp. 23–24.
- ⁵⁵ 'Sikh Dharma International: A New Path To a Great Future' Sikh Dharma International, PO Box 351149, 1649 So Robertson Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA. 90035 USA.
- ⁵⁶ Sethi, A.S. 'The Religion of Nanak: Basic Issues' in *The Sikh Courier*, Spring–Summer 1972, pp. 13–17.
- ⁵⁷ Kaur, Premka 'Rejoinder' in *Sikh Review*, 21 (1973): p. 52.
- ⁵⁸ Dusenbery, 'Of Singh Sabhas', p. 96.
- ⁵⁹ Kaur, 'Rejoinder', pp. 52–53.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

An examination of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā, the Nāmdhāris, the Ravidāsīs, the Vālmīkis and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere has illustrated that groups present in the *Panth* highlight various perspectives in relation to the issue of Sikh identity. A number of themes pertaining to issues of identity have emerged throughout the book. These five themes are utilized in order to clarify my claim that diversity is, indeed, a feature of Sikhism. The themes are: (1) The concept of Gurū; (2) Leaders and founders; (3) The role of the *Rehat Maryādā*; (4) Caste; and (5) Punjabi ethnicity.

The Concept of Gurū in Sikhism

Teachings concerning the concept of Gurū are central to the Sikh faith and its followers; indeed, a ‘Sikh’ is translated as a ‘disciple’. The Gurūs are the preceptors of the truth, since the term *gurū* is derived from two words *gu* and *rū*, signifying that a Gurū is the dispeller of ignorance. Sikhs fundamentally believe that after his death in 1708, Gurū Gobind Singh instituted the *Ādi Granth* as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Thus, the line of ten human Gurūs came to an end. Any group that continues the line of human Gurūs is regarded as heretical by *Khālsā* Sikhs.

The belief held by the overwhelming majority of Sikhs, that Gurū Gobind Singh had proclaimed the *Ādi Granth* as the eternal Gurū, is not without criticism among some scholars. Madanjit Kaur has contested these views very well and has demonstrated that there exists ample evidence to suggest that the *Ādi Granth* was instituted as the eternal Gurū in 1708.¹ She further states that Gurū Gobind Singh’s decision to do this had been the fulfilment of the ideals of the earlier Gurūs. Kaur highlights that the idea was already present in the *Granth*, she writes: ‘It is evident . . . that the doctrine laid down in the *Guru Granth* by the earlier Sikh gurus, was reiterated by Guru Gobind Singh, when he hailed the *Granth* as the *Guru Granth*’.² The evidence that Kaur refers to is found in AG 515:

The reverend Lord is the Truest of the true, and true are the Guru’s hymns.
Through the True Guru is the truth recognised and the man is easily absorbed in
the True Lord.³

I accept that the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* was instituted as Gurū in 1708. To argue whether this belief is historically correct is beyond the scope of the present work and is unnecessary, given that the vast majority of Sikhs (and certainly *Khālsā* Sikhism) accepts the validity of the tradition.⁴

Because of its position as the promulgator of *Khālsā* stringency, the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* explicitly affirms the belief that a Sikh should believe in the ten Gurūs, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and must have ‘no other guide or Book’.⁵ It is the Nāmdhāris, as seen in [Chapter Three](#), who reject what must be claimed as an essential Sikh belief. Surprisingly, the Nāmdhāris are, nevertheless, regarded as being within the *Panth*. This is so regardless of a major difference in belief that it should place their Sikh identity in question. It would seem, then, that *outward* acceptance of *Khālsā* regulations is more important than acceptance of fundamental *belief* in this case. On the other hand, there are many Sikhs who label groups such as the Nāmdhāris as heretics, precisely because they do not accept one of the main tenets of *Khālsā* belief. An important consideration, therefore, is whether deviation from one central core belief, and yet stringent observation of the *Khālsā* form promotes or hinders Sikh identity. What is clear, however, is that *total* conformity to *Khālsā* stipulations would be impossible for the Nāmdhāris.

Prominent positions are attributed to holy men such as *Sants* and *Bābājīs* within the Sikh community as a whole, though not to the extent of adding to the established line of Gurūs. But in the case of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā, as highlighted in [Chapter Two](#), and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, as indicted in the previous chapter, particular *Sants* and *Bābājīs* are elevated to levels of supremacy by their followers. I have often gained the impression that prominent *Sants* and *Bābājīs* attempt to establish themselves as the voice of the Sikh Gurūs. Such *Sant*-orientated groups also challenge *Khālsā* teachings. Further, they tend to distinguish themselves from the general *Panth*, causing diversity of the *Panth* as a whole. The *Sants* and *Bābājīs* are accorded far more prominence than *Khālsā* Sikhism requires. Again, such groups would find *total* adherence to *Khālsā* rules, and total conformity, impossible.

There are groups who deliberately emphasize their distinction from the *Panth* by upholding Gurūs, other than the ten Sikh Gurūs. Two such examples are the Ravidāsīs and the Vālmīkis (as seen in [Chapters Four](#) and [Five](#) respectively). For these groups the ten Sikh Gurūs are mere holy men and are not especially revered. Some of those who had taken *amrit* into Sikhism may occasionally revere the Sikh Gurūs on occasions such as *gurpurbs*, but such groups do not any longer have an aspiration to be associated with the *Panth* at all, mainly due to their disappointment with not being treated as equals. For both the Ravidāsīs and Vālmīkis, their Gurūs are *zāt* orientated, and I agree thoroughly with Kalsi when he points out that the caste of a particular *Sant* or holy man reflects on the caste composition of his followers.⁶ It is well to remember that the Sikh Gurūs also all belonged to the same *zāt* and this has had

its effect in retaining caste exclusivity in many contexts in Sikhism, hand in hand with social tradition that prefers to retain caste practices. This suggests that uniformity in the *Panth* is impossible.

Leaders and Founders

Each of the five groups looked at, has leaders and, indeed, founders of its own. These leaders and founders are not a part of the general *Panth* and, moreover, are responsible for the differentiation of each group from the general *Panth*. The different leaders have taken the groups in various directions and highlight important considerations for the issue of Sikh identity. *Sants* have introduced a number of features that distinguish a group from Sikhs of the general *Panth*. This is accentuated because the *Sants* have their own position of rather elevated importance amongst the group. Important, nevertheless, is the fact that the majority of *Sants* and *Bābājīs* place immense stress on the *Khālsā* form. In the case of the Gurū Nānak Nishkān Sewak Jathā and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, both groups have leaders who, although causing a distinction from the general *Panth*, show eagerness for the *Khālsā* identity. In this respect, these groups must be regarded as being thoroughly Sikh. On the other hand, one cannot ignore that many leaders and founders create separatism within general Sikh identity. It is highly unlikely that they would ever conform to uniform belief and praxis that the *Rehat Maryādā* requires.

Dissatisfaction within the *Panth* has resulted in historical leaders and founders being acknowledged, these historical founders tend to be non-Sikh, as in the cases of Ravidās and Vālmīki. Here, the orientation of the groups has been further and further away from Sikhism to a point of non-identity with Sikhs. Needless to say, such separatist groups place no importance at all on the *Khālsā* form, though they may keep the turban and *kes*.

The teachings and character of different leaders and founders are responsible for the general ethos of various groups. If these leaders and founders taught no differently from what the general *Panth* maintains, then there would be no such groups: there would be an overall uniformity of the *Panth*. I reiterate however, that leaders and founders from a Sikh background continue to emphasize the *Rehat Maryādā's* ideal that a *true* Sikh is an *amṛitdhārī*. So, on the one hand, leaders can, indeed, promote corporate Sikh identity and *Khālsā* identity, but they tend to create divisiveness by their very presence.

The Role of the *Rehat Maryādā* in Relation to Sikh Identity

An important issue that needs to be addressed is whether the five groups that have been examined accept the authority of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, or

whether they have their own rules and regulations. Then, too, there is the issue of whether the behaviour and beliefs of each group inhibit or strengthen Sikh identity in terms of *Khālsā* praxis. Significantly, one of the major purposes of the *Rehat Maryādā* is to make a *Khālsā* Sikh aware of his or her identity as being distinct from the other faiths of Indian origin: thus, it follows that the distinctiveness of Sikh identity as *Khālsā* is best accentuated in the *Rehat Maryādā*.

With the establishment of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, distinctiveness of the *Khālsā* Sikhs was certainly evident, since they were clearly different from other Punjabis in terms of their outward appearance. Importantly, not all followers of the Sikh faith underwent *khaṇde-dī-pahūl*. Thus, Sikh tradition and praxis were interpreted differently by the two major divisions of Sikhs: the *Khālsā* and the *sahajdhārī*.⁷ The point I wish to make is that there were clearly *different types* of Sikhs. And this, as illustrated, continues to the present day.

Many of the taboos highlighted in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* continue to be practised by a substantial number of Sikhs today. As remarked earlier, the *Rehat Maryādā* is emphatic that Sikhs should not follow Hindu superstitions, as it describes them, neither should Sikhs keep fasts: this is clearly articulated in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*:

A Sikh should have no belief in caste, black magic, superstitious practices; such as, the seeking of auspicious moments, eclipses, the practices of feeding Brahmins in belief that the food will reach one's ancestors, ancestor's worship, fasting at different phases of the moon, the wearing of sacred threads and similar rituals.⁸

However, superstitious practices have not been totally obliterated among the *Panth* as a whole. I have come across ample evidence to illustrate clearly that many Sikh females gather for the annual Hindu fast of *kurvā choth*, which is kept to safeguard one's husband. This is one instance among many where social praxis takes precedence over prescribed norms of behaviour. Another well-kept superstition applies to females who are not to wash their hair on certain days of the week. outward contradiction of the *Rehat Maryādā* that *incontestably* notes that a Sikh is not to believe in superstition. Furthermore, many non-vegetarian Sikhs will not eat meat on certain days of the week, to regard some days as holier than others is not in line with Sikh teachings.

Another example of the blurred religious boundaries between Sikh and Hindu is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that, in India, many Sikhs wia, many Sikhs will undertake pilgrimages to Hindu shrines, in particular those associated with the *Mātā*, the Hindu goddess. Many Sikhs who visit India from the diaspora will envisage some kind of journey in order to pray for the welfare of the family. These practices were strongly discouraged by the *Tat Khālsā*: indeed, it was such practices that were initially responsible for the aims of the Singh Sabhās. The Punjabi-Hindu connection cannot be totally severed for a substantial proportion of Sikhs, who continue to participate in what are

essentially Hindu practices. It is, thus, the common Punjabi ethnicity of Sikhs and Hindu Punjabis that results in shared customs to the present day. Interestingly, I have come across many Hindu Punjabis who will wear the *karā* with as much fervour as a *sahajdhārī* Sikh. On the other hand, many Sikhs watch televised serials of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* with as much enthusiasm as a Hindu would.⁹

From personal experience as a British-born Sikh, and coming from a *sahajdhārī* family, I believe that a substantial proportion of diaspora-born Sikhs (especially the younger generation) do not know what the *Rehat Maryādā* is: this is more so if their families are non-*Khālsā*. The younger generation's attitudes have not received much favour among the elder generation of *kesdhārīs*. There is an interesting example of a puzzled *kesdhārī*, Jaskirat Singh, who writes to his father, Harcharan Singh, about the continued relevance of the Five Ks today.¹⁰ Harcharan replies by remarking that the Five Ks are not symbols of mere practical utility, but are rather symbols of love. Therefore the *aspirations* behind the Five Ks are of major importance, not their outward significance. Harcharan Singh further tells his son that a personal relationship with God is possible by totally abandoning oneself to God's Will.¹¹

Many of the younger generation of diaspora-born Sikhs are of the opinion that one should not idly participate in something that is not understood or aspired to. They hold that a purified interior is far more important than a mere outward show of symbols that have no significance for them. This further adds to the proportion of *sahajdhārīs* in the *Panth* who, in the *Khālsā* terms of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, are not *true* Sikhs. It is well to remember that Gurū Nānak's emphasis was on the interiorizing of religion, he was against prescribed rules and regulations and believed that the *man* of the individual should be cleansed and spiritually uplifted by *bhakti*. A pertinent question is whether *Khālsā* Sikhs have become so concerned with the Five Ks that the idea of *gurmukh* is ignored. And here I must reiterate the point that the *Khālsā* form was not instituted by the first Gurū of the Sikhs.

The Vālmikis and Ravidāsīs, as a whole, have no place for the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* due to the promotion of a separatist identity. A valid criterion for the Sikh identity of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā is clearly present in its utilization and obeying of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. The Nāmdhārīs are a paradox to the issue of Sikh identity since they reject the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* and its central belief yet uphold the *Khālsā* form and are accepted by *Khālsā* Sikhs. It would appear that the *Tat Khālsā* probably rejected the Kūkāṁ from the *Panth* due to the diversity that the latter were perpetuating. The Nāmdhārīs did not yield to the reforms of the *Tat Khālsā*, refusing to replace the *rahit* as issued by Gurū Rām Singh with the *Tat Khālsā* ideals. Since the Nāmdhārīs already had their focus centred on the living Gurū and his *rahit*, they would not have, and neither have they to the present day, adopted the *Tat Khālsā* reforms anyhow.

The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere thoroughly recognizes the authority of the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. Thus, it is clear that not all Sikhs recognize or, indeed, adhere to the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. The definition of a Sikh as a *Khālsā* Sikh according to the *Rehat Maryādā* is insufficient to include the whole of the *Panth*, the majority of which is not *amritdhārī*. Furthermore, and this, I believe, is a key issue, in everyday practices the *Rehat Maryādā* rates second to accepted customs and traditions, for these are embedded in the ethnicity of Punjabi Sikhs. Importantly, however, non-*Khālsā* Sikhs are actually not required to follow the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*. Nevertheless, there is much uniformity in praxis; here the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* seems to be consulted and accepted. The issue of Sikh identity, I believe, is not, therefore, confined to the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, it is much wider than this. Since it is an *amritdhārī* Sikh who is to follow the *Rehat Maryādā*, what implications does this have for *sahajdhārī* Sikhs? Defining a Sikh is extremely difficult, therefore, if the yardstick is taken as the *Rehat Maryādā*, and, as has been shown, there are a number of problems associated with the providing of clear-cut boundaries in which to define *all* followers of the Sikh faith.

Caste and the Panth

It has been highlighted, in particular with regard to the Vālmīkis and Ravidāsīs, that *zāt* discrimination has not been obliterated from the *Panth*, even though the Sikh Gurūs introduced many features to highlight the egalitarian nature of the Sikh faith. In practice, the stigma of untouchability remains attached to the lower *zāts* that include the Vālmīkis and the Ravidāsīs.

The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere is distinct in terms of the issue of caste in the *Panth*. Since the *gorā* Sikhs are non-Punjabi, they have no caste divisions. Therefore, the practice of endogamy has no significance amongst them. Hence, *gorā* Sikhs are closer to the purer idealism of a casteless religion of Sikhism. Members of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā also observe endogamy. The Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā is composed largely of the *rāmgarhīā zāt*. However, members of other *zāts* are free to worship at the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā centres. The Nāmdhāris are somewhat different concerning endogamy for it is permissible to marry outside the *zāt*. Significantly, the present Gurū, who is a *rāmgarhīā*, is married to a *jaṭ*. Nevertheless, Nāmdhāris on the whole prefer to marry endogamously. During contacts with the Nāmdhāri community it was frequently remarked that a Nāmdhāri, whatever *zāt*, would not marry a Vālmīki or Ravidāsī. It would be interesting to research approximate numbers of Scheduled Classes within the Nāmdhāri community, however, during my research I came across none.

I have illustrated that *zāt* does, indeed, exist very widely in the *Panth*. Hence, although the lower *zāts* had abandoned the oppressiveness of Hinduism for

Sikhism, it became necessary for them to form their distinct faiths in order to overcome discrimination at the hands of higher *zāt* Sikhs and Hindus. The Ravidāsīs and Vālmikīs highlight the caste issue admirably and show that at the heart of Sikhism, *gurbāṇī* is not maintained. Needless to say, therefore, the *Panth* is not egalitarian. The practice of endogamy is a significant measure towards the preservation of *zāt* divisions within the *Panth*. Therefore, the question of who is a Sikh depends largely on one's *zāt* background, as well as the Punjabi ethnicity that has many dictations in accordance with the notion of *zāt*, the most important one being endogamy.

Punjabi Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a term commonly used to refer to the social identity, the culture and the traditions, of a community. The term can be traced to the Greek word *ethnos* that implies 'a cultural or spiritual sense of belonging'.¹² Mitchell considers ethnicity as a 'membership of a distinct people possessing their own customary ways or culture'.¹³ This shared belonging to a common culture, a common ancestry, language and attachment to a homeland are also the characteristics of ethnicity according to Avtar Brah.¹⁴ Again, Anthias stresses the 'sharing' of customs as constituting the ethnicity of a group. For him ethnicity is 'being socially located within a particular group and sharing its conditions of existence'.¹⁵ In this respect, therefore, Sikh ethnicity is commonly associated with the Punjabi culture and its traditions. Importantly, there are many Sikhs who are not particularly concerned with an overt dividing factor between Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs, at least in terms of the social context.

The extent to which ethnicity informs Sikh identity is exemplified well in the tensions that have arisen between Punjabi Sikhs and *gorā* Sikhs. This is inevitable since the nature of a non-Punjabi in the overall Punjabi *Panth* would be very different in terms of social context and behaviour. Furthermore, since I maintain that Sikh identity overall is linked to Punjabi praxis, it is clear that the *gorā* Sikhs make the issue of Sikh identity a more complex one. Brah highlights that a conjoined tie exists between culture and identity. Indeed, she holds that identity is illustrated through culture; the two 'are inextricably linked concepts'.¹⁶ This would support my contention that normative Punjabi praxis is something to which the western converts cannot readily adjust.

Gupta is of the opinion that 'identities are not permanently inscribed on our psyches but undergo *context* related changes'.¹⁷ It was such a 'context-related' change that, in the aftermath of the events of 1984 in the Punjab, essentially united the Sikh community as one and as distinct from Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Muslims, in the recognition of a 'persecuted Sikh minority'.¹⁸ And although Gupta's work is related to the so-called 'extremist' situation in the Punjab, the changing identity is also true, to some degree, of diaspora Sikhs.

These changes may result from political causes (as in Guptas example) or as a result of migration where offspring born in the diaspora are caught between the two cultures associated with their ethnic origin and with their country of birth. Many Sikh parents are concerned about the future generation and the survival of Sikhism in the diaspora. For them ethnicity provides the necessary nurturing of the next generation, making the younger generation more aware of its Punjabi ethnicity.

It is this ethnicity, far more than the diasporic environment, which decides accepted praxis for diaspora-born Sikhs. Sikhs of the diaspora, arguably on a marginal basis, are undergoing some kind of an identity *transformation* that, I suggest, has every possibility of becoming an identity *crisis* in a few generations. Values upheld by immigrant parents are not necessarily those maintained with rigidity by their diaspora-born offspring. The latter are caught between twin cultures, being diaspora-born but ethnically Punjabi. On this point, however, Brah is quick to remark that different perceptions of identity between the immigrant parents and diaspora children are not necessarily to be interpreted as conflicts. She believes that parents themselves, having been exposed to a foreign culture, sympathize with the 'cross-pressures which bear upon their children'.¹⁹

It follows that norms of society for Sikhs are not dictated by religion alone, their ethnicity is largely responsible for what is right and what is acceptable, in terms of social interaction. These norms are to a great extent determined by a central force, that of the *izzat* notion. The term *izzat* has a number of translations including 'honour', 'self-respect' and 'prestige'. Another Punjabi term used interchangeably with the term *izzat* is *mān*. According to McLeod, *izzat* is a *jaṭ* convention.²⁰ The *jaṭ*'s land in India is a mark of his honour: the greater the span of land, the greater the *izzat*.²¹ From personal experience, the concept of *izzat* is not only confined to the *jaṭ zāt*, it is a factor that underlies the social interaction of Indians as a whole. On a day-to-day basis, it is obvious from personal experience as a Punjabi female that, when it comes to normative behaviour, it is factors such as *izzat* and ethnicity that are more dominant and, indeed, more important, than the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā* itself. One example is the damage an out of caste, or an out of religion, marriage would have on the families *izzat*.

Importantly, *izzat* is not associated with a single individual; rather, *izzat* concerns the whole family. Sikh children are often forced to give up the idea of marrying out of *zāt* or out of religion, or otherwise face a future without the support of the families. If a Punjabi Sikh girl is inclined to follow her own desires, irrespective of the family's *izzat*, the family as a whole will be greatly concerned. If, for example, she had a boyfriend, the family, should they discover it, would be anxious to keep the matter secret. It would be very difficult to arrange a marriage for such a girl. These, again, are factors that would not normally be an issue for *gorā* Sikhs. In this way many Punjabi Sikhs

have given up their own wishes for the sake of their families: very few have the courage to go their separate ways, leaving it to fate whether the parents will ever wish to contact them again.

Parents of Punjabi children will look for spouses in an equal or higher *izzat* family. Very rarely will relationships be formed with a family of ill-reputed *izzat*. This practice would thus include such factors as not arranging a marriage with a girl whose elder sister has run away from home or who has a flirtatious reputation. If an elder sister has married out of *zāt*/religion, it would become difficult to arrange marriages for the younger daughters. Of even greater shame for the whole family would be a pregnant, unmarried daughter. In this instance there have been cases where either the unmarried girl is forced to have a termination, or is taken to India and left there. Thus, all measures are taken to preserve the *izzat* of the family, in many cases at whatever the cost.

My personal perception is that the concept of *izzat* is more attached to females of the family. On the whole, a son may leave home, but when he wishes to return there is not as much tension as when a daughter has left home and the community has found out about it. Brown clearly illustrates the effects of the loss of *izzat* caused by a daughter to the whole family. He writes: 'Deviations from the traditional codes evoke profound disapproval and intense shame. The loss of a girls virginity, for example, becomes for the family involved a matter of irreparable harm and long-lasting humiliation. In cases such as this, indeed, the whole community shares the sense of ignominy'.²² Although written over thirty years ago, Brown's comments are as true today as they were in the 1970s. Therefore, dishonour will affect arranging marriages for the younger brothers and sisters, sometimes extending as far as cousins. It is in the best interest of the whole family, then, that daughters act *accordingly*. Thus, the notion of *izzat*, which is so evident among Punjabi Sikhs, necessitates many obligations in a social context.²³ Hence, Sikh identity is expressed both religiously *and* ethnically, and it is likely that the latter is more important in the case of the majority of diaspora Sikhs. The *gorā* Sikhs cannot possibly accommodate this social culture, that is so much a part of everyday Sikh behaviour. In this respect, my contention is that traditional social praxis is very important in determining identity. On the everyday level, as shown above, social behaviour and practice are often more prominent than the beliefs of a group.

Language is another issue behind why the *gorā* Sikhs are not accepted by Punjabi Sikhs. The Punjabi language is the language of the majority of Sikhs. The Sikh Gurūs themselves were Punjabis and wrote in *gurmukhī*. Therefore, Sikh services are largely conducted in *gurmukhī* and Punjabi. *Gorā* Sikhs, as a community, cannot, in general, speak or understand Punjabi, so their religious services are conducted in English. On the other hand, the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā, Nāmdhāris, Ravidāsīs and Vālmīkis, all live according to the behaviour which required to maintain or increase the *izzat* of the family. They share a common language and traditions originating from their shared Punjabi

ethnicity. Notably, Punjabi ethnicity alone does not promote Sikh identity. This has been illustrated clearly by the insistence that the Vālmikis and Ravidāsīs place on their distinctiveness. In these cases, issues relating to Sikh identity are informed by factors outside ethnicity, even though such Sikh identity is also informed by the Punjabi culture and traditions.

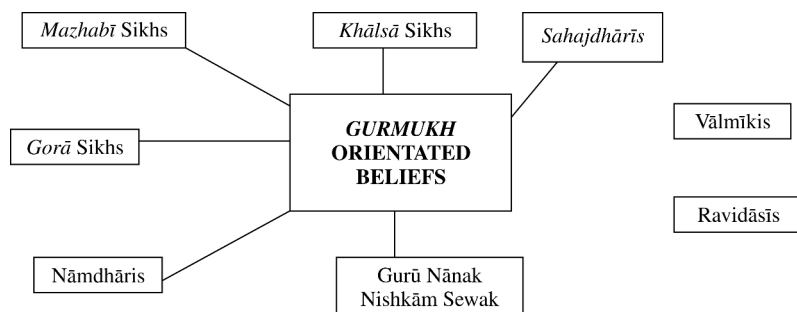
The Way Forward

I have alluded to the fact that attempts to create one overall, uniform definition of Sikh identity cannot be sustained. It is not possible to cite a monolithic definition, such as that contained in the Sikh *Rehat Maryādā*, which will encompass all *types* of Sikhs. Therefore, not all Sikhs are the same, as is commonly assumed. There are present in the *Panth*, many types of Sikhs, these include:

- Punjabi Sikhs
- *Gorā* Sikhs
- Vegetarian/non-vegetarian Sikhs
- *Mazhabī* Sikhs
- *Khālsā* Sikhs
- Non-*Khālsā* Sikhs
- *Khālsā* Sikhs with living Gurūs
- *Khālsā* Sikhs with particular *Sants*

Evidently, I have suggested that there is no authoritative yardstick with which to assess the issue of Sikh identity. The everyday life of a Sikh does not always accord with the *Rehat Maryādā* or, indeed, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. One suggestion is a federal identity of the *Panth* as a whole. This would imply a unity of Sikhs worldwide but independence in the interpretation of Sikhism for the different groups. A federal identity of Sikhs and Sikh groups might mean one or two core beliefs, such as the acceptance of *gurbāṇī* and belief in the Sikh Absolute, but, further than that, it is up to the individual group to express its unique beliefs and practices. Thus, the essential core of Sikh identity must be *gurmukh* orientated, the characteristics of which would be an emphasis on *nām simran* and truthful living. These would be at the heart of the federal identity of the *Panth* as a whole and would not place an accentuated importance on the *Khālsā* form. The diagram in [Figure 7.1](#) summarizes the position of the five groups in relation to a suggested federation of the *Panth*.

Thus the Ravidāsīs and Vālmikis would not fit into the federation due to their assertion of a non-Sikh identity. Indeed, if the anti-caste pronouncements of the *Rehat Maryādā* had been effective, they would not have had the problems that led to their breaking away in the first place. My claim is that a corporate



7.1 The federal identity of the *Panth*

uniform identity should not be the aim, but a federal identity where distinction from the general *Panth* is exemplified by different groups. I believe that a federation of the *Panth* would allow a core identity based on the ideal of the *gurmukh*. This would reduce caste exclusivity in the *Panth*; it would enable the *gurmukh* to accept *mazhabī* Sikhs as equals, thus enabling the latter to be a part of the *Panth*. This is the essence of *gurbāṇī*.

A suggestion of a federal identity is pragmatic because it is exactly what Sikhs, as a whole, will do, and have done, anyhow. On the other hand, the counter-argument is that supporting a federal approach will actually entrench separatist groups and, therefore, *zāt* based groups. The latter, being a contradiction of *gurbāṇī*, will result in *all* lower-caste groups being discriminated against and would cause their inevitable break-off from the *Panth*. Furthermore, an examination of the five groups has indicated that it would be difficult to be accepted as a Sikh without being Punjabi and high *zāt*. These two factors, in fact, tend to override beliefs, at least in practice. The Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere illustrates rather well that any new movement in Sikhism will tend to be ostracized on grounds of *zāt* and Punjabi ethnicity: in this case, the lack of both. It will be interesting to see what happens with the future generation of *gorā* Sikhs. That is to say, will they be excluded so much that they will be forced to be completely separatist and divorce themselves from Punjabi Sikhs of the *Panth* despite their *Khālsā* orientation? However, even if an essentially *gurmukh* basis existed, I believe the *Panth* would still not abandon endogamy; this is a feature of Indian society that is too deeply rooted to be permanently eschewed. But federal identity, rather than a *Khālsā* identity, would unite all Sikhs in the *religious* context, by allowing each Sikh to accept a common core of the faith, but maintain differences in how that core faith is manifest in related belief and praxis. A common thread to unite *all* Sikhs, *Khālsā* and *sahajdhārī*, is certainly needed, but not a rigid one that excludes more than it enfolds.

What needs to be addressed in contemporary society is that the diaspora is bringing new challenges to the survival of Sikhism, especially so with diaspora-born generations. There are many Sikhs today who are losing the essence of Sikhism as contained in the pages of its holy *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and yet insist on the outward form. A balance needs to exist between keeping the *Khālsā* form and being a *gurmukh*. There is no worth in a *Khālsā* Sikh who is essentially *manmukh* orientated, this is not an adherence to the teachings of the Gurūs. I strongly consider that mere conformity to outward symbols does not constitute a *true* Sikh. A *true* Sikh is a *gurmukh*: one, I envisage, who does not necessarily have to be *Khālsā* adhering. Importantly, Gurū Nānak himself rejected the sacred thread (a mark of the *dvijā* classes) as not having any worth in the individual's quest for *mukti*. This does not mean that I devalue the *Khālsā* form, but rather a Sikh should be inwardly pure first and then, if one desires, an external identity can be taken up. There should be no such requirement that all Sikhs *must* display the *Khālsā* form. Thus, I reiterate that the essential core of Sikh identity must be *gurmukh* orientated: this is what *gurbāṇī* itself consistently voices.

Historically, the indicators for Sikh identity have been mainly *gurmukh* based. This is the answer for the future, and there should be no room for caste prejudice among Sikhs. A scrutiny of the five groups has revealed that the character and beliefs of particular leaders and founders inform the general ethos of a group of followers. This, in turn, is responsible for separatist groups *within* the general *Panth*. Where the leaders and founders have been non-Sikh there has been a complete break-off *from* the *Panth*. The beliefs and practices of the five groups show diversity, and Sikh identity will have to confront this issue. Moreover, the *Rehat Maryādā* is not *the* authoritative yardstick by which to assess Sikh identity since it excludes a wide majority of Sikhs who do not conform to a *Khālsā* identity and is thus responsible for the very divisions within the *Panth* that it is trying to obliterate. Furthermore, many *Khālsā* Sikhs are not living up to the tenets of Sikhism. If the *Rehat Maryādā* is unable to endorse its own tenets in practice, how can *Khālsā* Sikhs expect conformity in the wider context?

In my introductory remarks, I raised issues of identity in relation to my family who, like the majority of the *Panth* are not *amritdhārī*. I have illustrated that, like my family, for so many Sikhs the *Rehat Maryādā* does not hold any marked position of importance. The *Rehat Maryādā*'s *Khālsā* definition excludes a substantial percentage of Sikhs from its ideal of who a Sikh is. I conclude, therefore, that a *true* Sikh is essentially a *gurmukh*. This is what constitutes Sikh identity and encompasses *all* Sikhs. And above all it is the *gurmukh* who is the ideal personification of *gurbāṇī*. Moreover, it is the *gurmukh* alone who has the opportunity to tread on the path towards *mukti*, leaving the final outcome to the *Hukam* of *Wāhegurū*.

Notes

¹ Kaur, Madanjit 'The Guruship and Succession of Guru Granth Sahib' in Mann, J.S. and Saraon, H.S. (1989) *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*, Irvine: Sikh Community of North America, pp. 121–37.

² Ibid., p. 126.

³ Singh, Manmohan (1996 rp of 1962 edn) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 1698.

⁴ Detailed research that questions this view can be found in McLeod, W.H. (1975) *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Delhi: Oxford University Press; and Grewal, J.S. (1982) *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University.

⁵ Amritsar, *Rehat Maryada* (1978) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p. 21.

⁶ Kalsi, S.S. (1992) *The Evolution of a Sikh Community in Britain*, Leeds: University of Leeds, p. 129.

⁷ Oberoi, H. (1997) *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 24.

⁸ *Amritsar Rehat Maryada*, p. 12.

⁹ Though it is unlikely that the same enthusiasm is shown by the same Sikhs for an *Eid* celebration on television.

¹⁰ See Singh, Harjot (1999) *We are not Symbols: A Dialogue Between a Father and a Son*, Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹² Gupta, D. (1997) *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 6.

¹³ Mitchell, G.D. (1976) *A New Dictionary of Sociology*, London: Routledge, cited in O'Donnell, M. (1994 rp of 1991 edn) *Race and Ethnicity*, Essex: Longman Group UK Limited, p. 4.

¹⁴ Brah, Avtar (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London: Routledge, p. 163.

¹⁵ Anthias, F. (1992) *Ethnicity, Class, Gender and Migration*, Aldershot: Avebury, p. 29.

¹⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁹ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p. 42.

²⁰ McLeod, W.H. (1997) *Sikhism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 216.

²¹ Ibid., p. 248.

²² Brown, J. (1970) *The Un-Melting Pot: An English Town and Its Immigrants*, London: Macmillan, p. 123.

²³ Ibid., p. 12.

Appendix

Illustrations and literature from the groups



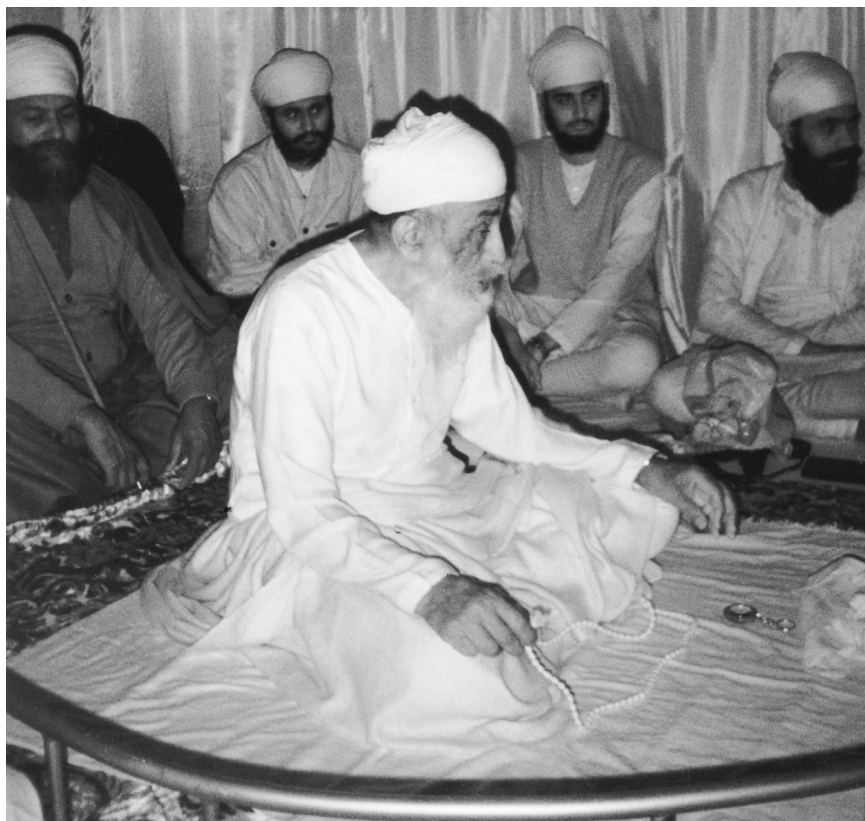
- A.1** The office of the Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā at Amritsar. The present *bābāji* is situated in the front row, seven from the left. He is indicated by X



A.2 Sant Puran Singh and Bhāi Norang Singh at the Birmingham *gurdwārā*



A.3 Sant Puran Singh



A.4 The Spiritual Head of the Nāmdhāris, Gurū Jagjīt Singh. Photograph taken during the Gurū's visit to the Forest Gate Centre, London, in November 1997



A.5 The present Gurū leaving the Forest Gate Centre. The clothing of the *saṅgat* and their turbans are characteristic of the Kūkās



A.6 A participant of the *havan* ceremony taking *amrit* before commencing the rituals

HAPPY DIWALI

ਦੀਵਾਲੀ ਮੁਬਾਰਕ

Diwali is the festival of lights. In India it is one of the major festivals, celebrated almost throughout the country.

When Lord Rama returned to Aujodhaya after 14 years exile into the jungle, people of that kingdom welcomed him, his wife Sita and brother Lakhshman with the display of lights. To all of us, Diwali is joyous occasion and reminds us of the following:

Victory of Goodness over Evilness

While Rama, Sita and Lakhshmana were in the jungle, the demon king Ravana abducted Sita and took her to his Kingdom at Lanka. Although, Ravana was wise and had divine power blessed to him by Lord Shiva, but he always used this power for many wrong things.

Lord Rama and Sita were the incarnations of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi, who came together to this world as Rama and Sita for the purpose of destroying demon kings like Ravana. Lord Rama invaded Lanka, killed Ravana and rejoined his wife Sita.

To obey and give full regard to parents.

Rama was sent to exile by his father, King of Aujodhaya at a demand made by his step-mother who wanted the throne for her own son. Rama did not resist, though he was the rightful heir to the throne. But obeyed his father and accepted to go to the jungle for 14 years.

The love, respect and regard for older brother.

Lakhshman went to the exile, simply because he loved his older brother Rama and wanted to stay with him in the jungle. Also, Lakhshman gave Sita a motherly respect.

A.7 Celebrating *dīwālī* in the Hindu context by Ravidāsīs

HYMN (AARTI)

Children you should recite this hymn daily,

NAM TERO AARTI MAJAN MURARAY
 HAR KE NAAM BIN JHUTHEY SAGAL PASAREY
 NAM TERO ASSNO NAM TERO URSA
 NAME TERO KESRO LECHHITKAREY
 NAM TERO AMBHULA NAAM TERO CHANDNO
 GHAS JAPEY NAM LE TUJHE KOW CHAREY
 NAM TERO DIWA NAAM TERO BATI
 NAM TERO TAIL LE MAHEN PASAREY
 NAM TERE KI JOT LAGAYI
 BHAIO UJAARO BHAWAN SAGLAREY
 NAM TERO TAGA NAM PHOOL MALA
 BHAR ATHARA SAGAL JUTHAREY
 TERO KIYA TUJEY KEYA ARPOU
 NAM TERA TUHI CHAWR DHOLAREY
 DAS ATHA ATU SATHEY CHAREY KHANI
 EHA WARTAN HAI SAGAL SANSAREY
 KEHE RAVIDASS NAM TERO AARTI
 SATNAM HAI HAR BHOG TUHAREY.

THE RELIGIOUS SLOGANS (JAI-KARA)

**JO BOLEY - SO NIRBHAY -
 SHRI GURU RAVIDASS JI KI JAI -**

**SHRI GURU RAVIDASS SHAKTI -
 AMAR RAHAY**

JAI GURUDEV

A.8 Emphasis is placed on children learning the hymns of Ravidās, rather than the *mūl mantar*. A clear indication of the non-Sikh orientation of the Ravidāsī community

GURU RAVIDASS DHARMIK SABHA

Telephone :
(0902) 50187



GURU RAVIDASS TEMPLE
181 DUDLEY ROAD
WOLVERHAMPTON
WEST MIDLANDS

OUR REF GRDS/IVL/785

YOUR REF.

DATE

BRIEF HISTORY OF THIS SABHA

Shri Guru Ravidass Dharmik Sabha, Shri Guru Ravidass temple, 181 Dudley Road, Wolverhampton, is a body of those people who are interested in the well-being of the Ravidassia community, Ad-Dharmi community, backward classes, so-called untouchables, the poorest of the world, and those who care for as well as believe in humanity. Since the formation of this sabha in 1963, it has tried its best to unite our people who are dedicated and devoted to the teaching and philosophy of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji. Here we like to mention that this Sabha has achieved very great respect in our own people and in multicultural society in this country and in India, with its work and deeds towards the upliftment of our poor masses.

We are proud to mention here that this Sabha has the honour to be the first organisation of this kind who have established a Shri Guru Ravidass Temple in Wolverhampton in this country and encouraged our people to establish similar organisations and temples in every town in the name of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji, as his mission was to serve everyone as a human being, create a free society, and he said there is only one God and in his eyes everybody is equal regardless of country, country, region, colour, cast or creed and he always wished to create a classless society.

This Sabha is working very hard in the field of education and has established an educational institution, Shri Guru Ravidass Technical Collage, Phagwara, Punjab, India. This is the first institution on its level ever built in the name of Guru Ravidass Ji. Now we are able to provide a particular type of technical education especially for poor masses to enable them to earn their living with pride and dignity.

This Sabha is working very hard with the Inter Faith Group to achieve multiracial understanding among people of all faiths. We have always worked to promote good human and brotherly relations, thus, for preserving peace and racial harmony which is very much needed to create a healthy and strong multiracial society.

A.9 Leaflet published by the Gurū Ravidāss Dharmik Sabhā Wolverhampton, England. This is also the base of the Dalit Welfare Association (DWA)

Jai Gurdev ਜੈ ਗੁਰਦੇਵ

Say it Loudly,

Say it Proudly,

We are:

Ravidassia

[Followers of Guru Ravidass Ji]

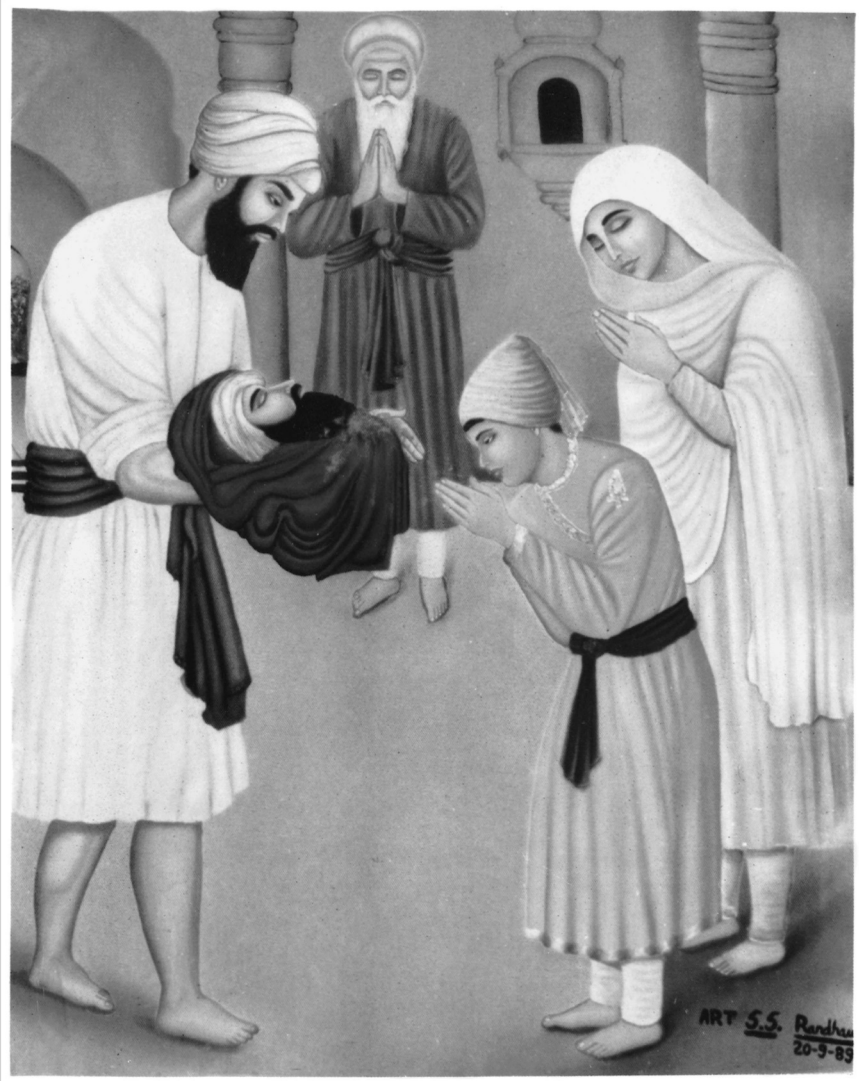
Dear Member of the Ravidassia Community

When answering a question about your religion, say it proudly that you are “RAVIDASSIA”.

In the next few weeks a Census Test will take place in the United Kingdom. You will answer a question on a survey form about your religion. Declare and answer that you are “Ravidassia”.

Issued by: Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha U.K.
June, 1997.

A.10 Notice to all Ravidāsīs to proclaim their religion as Ravidāsī



A.11 The Vālmīki connection with Sikhism. Bhāi Jaitā handing over the severed head of Gurū Tegh Bahādur to the child Gobind. A popular representation

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Index

- achūt* (Untouchables) 130
Ādi Granth 10, 24, 31, 53, 54, 59–61, 66, 67, 72–4, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 167, 174, 179, see also *Gurū Granth Sāhib*
Ad Dharm movement 89, 98–101, 117, 131, 132, 133
ādikavī 125
ādivāsīs 95, 99, 133
advaita (non-dualism) 134, 137–8, 141, 143–5
Ajapāl Singh 60, 61
Akalīs 21, 22, 23, 24, 25
Akal Takht 23, 159, 173
akhaṇḍ pāth 48, 49, 52, 54, 113–14
amrit initiation 12, 15, 16, 22, 28, 35n, 38, 39, 41, 47, 51, 52, 55, 56, 65, 160, 161, 168, 180, see also *khaṇḍe-dī-pāhul*
amritdhārī (an initiated Sikh of the *Khālsā*) 1, 2, 12, 15, 16, 25–8, 31, 43, 45, 46, 48, 50, 51, 54, 55, 65, 79, 84, 172, 181, 184, 190
anand karāj 26, 85
Anand Marriage Act (1909) 16, 18
ardās 61, 72, 171
 Nāmdhāris *ardās* 83
 Ravidāsī *ardās* 112
 Vālmiki *ardās* 146, 147
Ārya Samāj 15, 19, 132–3
avatār (God incarnate) 11, 44, 102–4, 122n, 126, 127, 139–40, 144

bābājī 38, 40, 41, 46, 47, 52, 180, 181, 192
baisākhī 10, 16, 52, 53, 58n, 65, 66, 81, 113, 147, 170, 171, 174
 of 1699 CE 11, 12, 17
Bālāk Singh, Gurū 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 74, 81, 83
bāṇī (teachings of the *Gurūs*) 5, 74, 172
bhagat bāṇī 91, 120n
bhakti (loving devotion) 5, 6, 31, 39, 41, 44, 45, 92, 102–3, 105, 126, 136, 137, 138, 139, 141
 saguṇa bhakti 6
 nirguṇa bhakti 6
Bhaini Sāhib 63, 65, 70, 74
Bhāi Gurdās 7, 8, 30
Bhāi Jaitā/Jīwan Singh 124, 147, 153, 202

Bhāi Mohinder Singh 41, 42, 44, 52, 53, 55
Bhāi Norang Singh 40, 41, 42, 46, 54, 193
bhog 48, 52, 76, 79
brāhmīns (Hindu priests) 6, 7, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 27, 64, 90, 91, 92, 96–7, 127, 129, 131, 182
British Raj 15, 22, 23, 24, 62, 63, 66–70, 73, 99

caste in the *Panth* 27, 93–8, 110, 132, 184–5, see also *egalitarianism*
chamār 90, 94, 116, 120n, 154n
charanamrit (*pre-khālsā* form of initiation) 8, 11, 35n, 92
charḥadī kalā 163–4
Chief Khālsā Dīwān 20, 34n
chūhrā 90, 94, 131, 133, 154n

Dalits 97–8, 128, 130
Dalit Welfare Association 101–2, 200
Dasam Granth 31, 73, 82, 83
deh-dhārī Gurū 72
dīwālī 10, 54, 113, 147, 170, 174, 198
Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Act (1971) 28
dvijā (twiceborn Hindu classes) 6, 31, 123n, 190

egalitarianism 50, 89, 93–5, 99, 101, 124–5, 131, 184, 185 see also *karāḥ prasād* and *laṅgar*
ego 39, 44, 45, 108, 136–8, 143, 165
enchanted universe (Sikh participation in) 16, 18
endogamy 43, 80, 94, 96, 114, 148, 171, 184–5, 189
ethnicity 4, 26, 39, 172–3, 177, 183–9

Five Ks 1, 11, 12, 15, 17, 22, 27, 28, 29, 46, 84, 119, 153, 168, 169, 172, 183

giānī 48, 49, 50, 52, 82, 145
Golden Temple 20, 23, 41, 159, 168
 see also *Harmandir Sāhib*
gorā (western Sikhs) 3, 4, 12, 33, 158–78, 184–7, 188, 189
granthīs 15, 21, 51, 148

gurbāṇī (Sikh teachings) 5, 9, 15, 16, 21, 33, 43, 44, 45, 49, 52, 56, 72, 74–6, 93, 124, 140, 163, 165, 174, 175, 176, 188, 189, 190

gurdwārā 21, 22, 26

Gurdwārās Act (1925) 5, 21, 24, 25

Gurdwārās Act (1971) 84

gurmukh 8, 45, 46, 109, 122n, 136–7, 188, 189, 190

gurpurbs 48, 53, 113–114, 170, 180

Gurū Amardās 9, 10, 40, 73, 75, 91, 123n

Gurū Arjan 10, 11, 30, 38, 45, 53, 55, 61, 73, 74, 85, 129

Gurū Gobind Singh 5, 11–14, 17, 18, 21, 25, 27, 29–31, 53, 54, 59–66, 74, 75, 81, 82, 83, 131, 147, 153, 169, 179

Gurū Granth Sāhib 2, 12, 16, 20, 24, 26, 28, 31, 33, 34, 37n, 39, 40, 41, 44–6, 48, 49, 51, 54, 55, 66, 69, 71, 73, 74, 81, 83–5, 90, 102–12, 115–18, 127, 132–6, 140, 143, 145–6, 149–54, 163–5, 167, 171–2, 174, 179, 180, 188, 190
see also *Ādi Granth*

Gurū Nānak 1, 5–9, 14, 19, 29, 30, 32, 40, 45, 54, 56, 62, 78, 90, 91, 93, 102–11, 131, 135, 139, 147, 149, 163, 165, 171, 190

Gurū Nānak Nishkāṁ Sewak Jathā 2, 3, 38–57, 59, 84, 89, 119, 154, 179–81, 183, 184, 187, 192

Gurū Rāmdās 79, 129, 167–8

Gurū Tegh Bahādūr 31

Harbhajan Singh Puri
see *Yog Bhajanī*

Harī Singh, Gurū 69, 70

harījans 89, 97, 115

Harmandir Sāhib 10, 14, 129, 168

haumai see *ego*

havan 78–81, 85, 197

Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) 2, 158–61, 163, 174

Hukam (Divine Will) 30, 72, 106–8, 142, 144, 176

hukamnāmās 69, 112

idol worship 26

IKYTA 161

izzat (honour) 4, 186–7

Jagjit Singh, Gurū 70, 71, 72, 74, 80, 83, 84, 195, 196

jaṭs 42, 55, 59, 80, 114, 184, 186

jīvaṇmukt 143–4

kaṛāh prasād 48, 50, 76, 79, 83, 93, 112, 117

karma (law of action and reaction) 5, 7, 45, 72, 105–8, 142–3

kes (unshorn hair) 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 149

kesdhārī (a Sikh with unshorn hair) 1, 2, 12, 13, 28, 43, 51, 52, 84, 149–50, 169, 183

Keys Affair 23, 24

Khālsā 1–5, 7, 11, 15–21, 24–9, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35n, 41, 42, 45, 49, 51, 53–7, 59, 62, 63, 66, 73, 81, 82, 84, 85, 114–15, 119, 147, 153, 158, 161, 163, 166–70, 172, 174–6, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 188, 189, 190

creation of 11, 12, 13, 14

khaṇḍe-dī-pāhul (initiation into the *Khālsā*) 8, 11, 17, 94, 182

kīrtan (devotional singing) 5, 75, 78, 81, 83, 146, 147, 168

Kūkā 59, 62, 65–73, 75, 76, 78, 80, 83, 85, 183, 196

see also *Nāmdhāris*

kuṇḍalīnī yoga 158–66, 169–70, 174

laṅgar 49, 50, 51, 76, 93, 110, 116–19, 131, 146, 148, 173

mahants 21, 22, 24, 25, 73

Mangoo Rām 98, 101

mañjī (system of authority) 9, 10

manmukh (self-orientated individual) 8, 109, 122n, 190

mazhabī Sikhs 124–5, 131–3, 147–54, 188, 189
menstruation 50

monā (a Sikh who cuts his/her hair) 1, 28, 46, 150

Mool Mantar 105–6

mukti (release from transmigration) 28, 44, 45, 56, 58n, 74, 105–10, 134, 136–7, 152, 164, 167, 190

Nadar 45, 72, 74, 105–8, 141, 142, 144

Nām (Name of God) 5, 43

Nāmdhāris 2, 3, 16, 20, 21, 57, 59–89, 119, 154, 167, 170, 172, 174, 179, 180, 183, 184, 187, 195

nām simran (meditation on the *Nām*) 5, 8, 31, 44, 45, 59, 62, 68, 74, 75, 103, 162–3, 188

nām japna see *nām simran*

Nānak Panth 5, 7

Nankanā 22, 23

nirguṇa Absolute 38, 43, 44, 102–4, 137, 138–40

niśān sāhib 52, 66, 82, 114–15, 147, 171, 174

nishkāmatā (selfless service) 39, 44, 45, 52

Pāc-vāṇī 102–11

pañj pyāre 11, 12, 25, 30, 31, 35n, 52, 53, 66

Panth (Sikh Community) 1–4, 7, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 25, 28, 32, 33, 34, 46, 48–50, 52, 54–7, 59–67, 69, 73–5, 82, 84, 85, 89, 124, 131, 153, 158, 160, 162, 163, 167, 171–7, 179, 180, 181–91

Partāp Singh, Gurū 70, 71, 81

patit 27, 28, 31

pūjārīs 145, 148

Puran Singh, Sant 38, 39, 40, 42, 46–8, 50, 54, 55, 193, 194

rahitnāmās 12, 13, 17

of Chaupa Singh 17, 18

Raidās Ji Ki Bāṇī aur Jīvan Charitra 90, 91, 93

Rāmāyaṇa 124–30, 132–3, 138–9, 144–6, 147–54, 183

Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa 126, 139

Rāmcaritāmānas 126–7, 139

rāmgaṛhīā (carpenter/artisan caste) 3, 39, 42, 50, 55, 56, 59, 63, 64, 74, 80, 114, 184

Rām Singh, Gurū 62–9, 73–5, 77, 80, 81, 82, 83, 183

Rangoon 70

Rangretīās 124

Ravidās, Gurū 89–93, 99, 101–11

Ravidāsīs 2, 3, 89–123, 130, 154, 174, 179, 180, 181, 184, 185, 187, 188, 198, 199, 201

Rehat Maryādā 1–3, 11, 13, 17, 20, 21, 26–9, 32, 33, 34, 37n, 39, 45, 46, 48–51, 53–5, 79, 82, 84, 113, 116, 146, 170, 172, 174, 176, 179–84, 188, 190

formulation of 25

Nāmdhārī Rehat Maryādā 76, 78

saguṇa Absolute 44, 103–4, 140–41

sahajdhārī (non-initiated Sikh) 1, 2, 12, 14–17, 20, 26, 27, 28, 46, 176, 182, 183, 184, 189

saṁsāra (cycle of transmigration) 5, 7, 8, 45, 72, 108–9, 135–6, 143–4

saṅgat (holy congregation) 7, 9, 10, 21, 40, 41, 51, 55, 56, 81, 137, 149, 162, 164

saṅgrānd 145–6

Sants (holy men) 7, 33, 38, 40, 43, 45, 46, 54, 55, 56, 137, 167, 180, 181, 188

Sant Khālsā 59, 63, 65, 66, 70, 81, 82

Sant tradition (of Northern India) 38, 103–4, 111–12

Gurū Nānak as heir to 6, 103, 111–12, 116

Scheduled Classes 59, 80, 86n, 89, 90, 95–98, 147, 184

sewā 39, 45, 49, 50, 51, 52, 167–8

Shromañī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) 3, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 32, 33, 41, 74, 159–60, 168, 176

Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere 2, 3, 158–78, 179, 181, 184, 189

Sikh diaspora 26, 32, 33, 39, 54, 55, 56, 177, 183, 185–6, 190

Singh Sabhā 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 32, 34n, 85, 182

Tat Khālsā 20, 21, 25–8, 34n, 59, 65, 85, 182, 183

Upaniṣads 99, 134, 139, 144, 145

vegetarianism (in Sikhism) 39, 51, 55, 76, 163, 170, 188

Vālmīki, Gurū 124–30

Vālmīkis 2, 3, 99, 124–57, 174, 179, 180, 181, 183, 184, 185, 187, 188, 202

Vālmik Jagṛītī 127–8, 133, 145, 148, 153

White tantra 165–6

women (position of) 49, 50, 65, 95, 187

Yoga Vasiṣṭha 126, 128, 133–46, 148, 151, 152, 154

Yogī Bhajan 158–78

zāt (caste) 3, 19, 20, 31, 34, 39, 42, 55, 57, 67, 80, 85, 93, 124, 128, 132, 144, 148, 153, 171, 180, 184–7, 188